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Editorial

The growing contact among people of different religious traditions has brought an increase in dialogue and relations. These can take many forms, one of which is exchange at the level of religious experience. This can include the desire of praying together, for prayer is one of the deepest expressions of the human heart. Yet fulfilling such a desire is not without difficulties.

Prayer is intrinsically linked to a belief system and a religious tradition. It is an expression of belief. An obvious question thus arises: can people of different belief systems really pray together? Hence the need to reflect on "interreligious prayer". In a number of Churches this issue has already been addressed. Some have produced guidelines for their communities. Yet there is an awareness that greater theological clarity is required.

In 1994 the Office on Inter-Religious Relations of the World Council of Churches (WCC-OIRR) and the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue (PCID) undertook a joint reflection on interreligious prayer. They did so with the encouragement of the Joint Working Group, a committee composed of representatives of the World Council of Churches and of the Catholic Church. The project was carried out in three stages. First a survey was made in the local churches and different traditions on the practice of interreligious prayer. This was completed in 1995. There followed a consultation, held in Bangalore, India, in 1996, bringing together a limited number of people from different Christian traditions who had experience of interreligious prayer. Finally a small group of theologians representing different Churches and coming from different parts of the world met to examine the theological foundations of interreligious prayer. This meeting took place in Bose, Italy, in 1997.

During the first phase questionnaires were sent out by the WCC-OIRR and the PCID, particularly to those parts of the world where religious plurality is most marked. The questionnaires were addressed to selected individuals as well as to communities. The responses were collated at the national level. The WCC-OIRR received fifty collated responses, whereas the PCID received only eight.

From the answers received by the WCC-OIRR, reflecting Orthodox, Anglican and different Protestant traditions, it emerged that Christian engagement in interreligious prayer is very sporadic. Some see it as a creative response to a new situation not foreseen by the historical traditions. The

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occasions for such prayer may be family events, such as baptisms, weddings or funerals, or they may be national days or events at a national or international level. The question is raised regarding the degree of engagement in interreligious prayer: is it just as an observer, or can there be a fuller participation recognizing the essential oneness of humanity? Does prayer mean the same in all religions, so much so that interreligious prayer can be seen as an expression of social harmony? The need for integrity is underlined and fidelity to one's own beliefs. The risk of syncretism is often invoked as a reason for questioning the legitimacy of interreligious prayer.

From the Catholic side, despite the limited number of responses, the evidence seemed to show that interreligious prayer is becoming more common. The "World Day of Prayer for Peace", held in Assisi in 1986 at the invitation of Pope John Paul II, is considered to have had a strong impact, although in fact in Assisi there was no interreligious prayer as such, since each religious tradition prayed separately. Reference is made to informal interreligious prayer, such as praying at the bedside of a sick friend of another religious tradition, but there are also accounts of organized interreligious prayer meetings on particular occasions, such as Thanksgiving Day, or in situations of conflict and war. Certain requirements are put forward for the one who is to participate in interreligious prayer: to be strong in one's own faith, to be in honest dialogue with one's partners, to have some knowledge of the other religions, to be able to distinguish what is cultural from what is truly religious.

The Bangalore Consultation, the second phase of the project, brought together people who had had a long and mainly positive experience of interreligious prayer. Some participants were invited to present theoretical papers, others shared their personal testimonies. The conclusions of the meeting were prepared in small groups. A distinction was made between multi-religious prayer and united interreligious prayer. In multi-religious prayer the prayers of different religious traditions are juxtaposed. By united interreligious prayer is meant an order of service planned and prepared by different religious traditions which all can then claim as their own. Each of these types was seen to have its advantages and disadvantages.

We are happy to publish two of the resource papers presented at Bangalore: that of Pierre de Béthune, a Benedictine monk, Secretary General of Monastic Interreligious Dialogue, and that of M. Thomas Thangaraj, Minister of the Church of South India, professor of theology at Emory University, Atlanta, Georgia, USA. From the testimonies four have been selected for publication: Gerrie Lubbe, Pretoria, South Africa, engaged in reconciliation both during and after the apartheid era; Aminda E. Sano, a member of a small community of consecrated women in Zamboanga, Southern Philippines,

involved in bringing Muslims and Christians together in dialogue; Ronnie Prabhu, animating a multi-religious group dedicated to building peace and harmony in the city of Bangalore, India; Lusmarina Campos Garcia, recalling the struggle of the poor in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, with particular reference to the spirit of solidarity shown by local people on the occasion of the U.N. summit on ecology. The final statement, *Findings of an Exploratory Consultation on Interreligious Prayer*, is also published here.

The Bangalore Consultation was limited in its scope. It could not take up the question of the biblical foundations for interreligious prayer, nor examine the theological implications. This was left to the third phase, a reflection involving a small number of theological experts, held in Bose, Italy. From this meeting we again present two resource papers: that of Franco Sottocornola, Director of Seimeizan, an interreligious dialogue centre in Japan, on interreligious prayer as seen from a biblical perspective; that of J. Russel Chandran, professor of theology in Bangalore, India, who explores the theme in the context of the Christian theology of religions. The final statement from Bose is also included.

To round out this publication, contributions were invited from three Christian theologians, George Pulikkottil from the Orthodox tradition, Gavin D'Costa, a Catholic, and Wesley Ariarajah, a Methodist. They were sent all the papers and the two statements and were asked to reflect on them from the standpoint of their own tradition.

The limits of this joint study project must be recognized. First of all, in the first phase, the basis of the survey was rather narrow, especially from the Catholic side. Secondly, it was decided not to try to deal with questions pertaining to attendance at the worship services of another religion or catering for the presence of other believers at Christian worship; attention was confined to prayer outside of formal worship. In the third place, there could be no attempt to provide an authoritative document on interreligious prayer for all Christians. Each Church has to take its own decisions in this matter. Yet all the Churches are faced with this question today. Taking into account its doctrinal implications, they have to give pastoral guidance to their members. It is our hope that this study project may have articulated the different aspects of the question, highlighting positive points but also areas where doubt remains, thus providing some direction for the practice of interreligious prayer.

Michael L. Fitzgerald (PCID)
Hans Ucko (WCC-OIRR)

Editorial

Les contacts grandissants entre les peuples appartenant à des religions différentes ont conduit à un développement du dialogue et des relations. Ceux-ci peuvent revêtir plusieurs formes, dont l'une est l'échange au niveau de l'expérience religieuse. Cela peut inclure le désir de prier ensemble, la prière étant une des expressions les plus profondes du cœur humain. Mais la réalisation de ce désir ne se fait pas sans difficultés.

La prière est intrinsèquement liée à un système de foi et à une tradition religieuse. C'est une expression de la foi. Une question évidente surgit alors: des gens appartenant à des systèmes de foi différents peuvent-ils réellement prier ensemble? D'où la nécessité d'une réflexion sur la «prière interreligieuse». Dans un certain nombre d'Eglises, cette réflexion est déjà en cours. Quelques-unes ont publié des orientations pour leurs communautés. Quoi qu'il en soit, il apparaît nettement qu'une plus grande clarté théologique est requise.

En 1994, le Bureau pour les Rapports Interreligieux du Conseil Oecuménique des Eglises (COE-OIRR) et le Conseil Pontifical pour le Dialogue Interreligieux (CPDI) ont entrepris une réflexion commune sur la prière interreligieuse. Ils l'ont fait, encouragés par le Groupe Mixte de Travail, un comité composé de représentants du Conseil Oecuménique des Eglises et de l'Eglise Catholique. Le projet s'est développé en trois étapes. D'abord, une enquête a été menée au niveau des Eglises locales et des différentes traditions sur la pratique de la prière interreligieuse. Celle-ci s'est achevée en 1995. Elle a été suivie d'un petit congrès qui s'est tenu à Bangalore, en Inde, en 1996 et qui a réuni un nombre limité de personnes provenant de différentes traditions chrétiennes ayant une expérience en matière de prière interreligieuse. Enfin, un petit groupe de théologiens représentant plusieurs Églises et venant de différentes parties du monde se sont rencontrés pour examiner les fondements théologiques de la prière interreligieuse. Cette réunion a eu lieu à Bose, en Italie, en 1997.

Durant la première étape, des questionnaires ont été envoyés par le COE-OIRR et le CPDI, en particulier dans les parties du monde où le pluralisme religieux est le plus marqué. Ces questionnaires ont été adressés aussi bien à des personnes qu'à des communautés. Les réponses ont ensuite été regroupées au niveau national. Le COE-OIRR a reçu cinquante réponses globales, trandis que le CPDI n'en a reçu que huit.

Les réponses envoyées au COE-OIRR, réfléchissant le point de vue des orthodoxes, des anglicans et des différentes traditions protestantes, ont fait apparaître que l'engagement des chrétiens sur le plan de la prière interreligieuse n'était que sporadique. Certains la considèrent comme une réponse créative à une nouvelle situation qui, jusque là, n'était pas prise en compte par les traditions historiques. Les occasions de prière interreligieuse peuvent être constituées par des événements familiaux, comme les baptêmes, les mariages ou les funérailles, ou par des fêtes nationales ou encore par des événements aux niveaux national ou international. Une question a surgi quant au degré d'implication dans la prière interreligieuse: est-il préférable de s'en tenir au rang d'observateurs ou de s'engager plus profondément en reconnaissant par là l'unité du genre humain? La prière revêt-elle la même signification dans toutes les religions, à tel point que la prière interreligieuse pourrait être considérée comme une expression d'harmonie sociale? Le besoin d'intégrité est souligné, ainsi que la fidélité à sa propre croyance. Le risque de syncrétisme est souvent invoqué aussi comme une raison de s'interroger sur la légitimité d'une telle démarche.

Du côté catholique, en dépit du nombre restreint de réponses, l'accent semble être mis sur le fait que la prière interreligieuse devient de plus en plus courante. Tous considèrent que la «Journée de Prière pour la Paix», qui s'est déroulée à Assise en 1986, à l'invitation du Pape Jean-Paul II, a eu un énorme impact, bien qu'en fait, à Assise, il n'y a pas eu de prière interreligieuse en tant que telle, puisque chaque tradition religieuse a prié séparément. Les réponses signalent aussi des modes informels de prière interreligieuse, comme le fait de prier au chevet d'un ami malade appartenant à une autre tradition religieuse; d'autres évoquent l'organisation de rencontres de prière interreligieuse à des occasions spécifiques, comme le *Thanksgiving Day*, ou dans des situations de conflits et de guerres. Certaines conditions ont été émises pour ceux qui participent à une prière interreligieuse: être solide dans sa foi, entamer un dialogue honnête avec ses partenaires, bien connaître les religions des autres, être capable d'établir une distinction entre ce qui relève du culturel et ce qui est véritablement religieux.

La consultation à Bangalore, seconde phase du projet, a réuni des personnes qui ont eu une longue expérience – surtout positive – de la prière interreligieuse. Plusieurs participants ont été invités à présenter un exposé théorique, tandis que d'autres ont fait part de leur témoignage personnel. Les conclusions de cette rencontre ont été préparées en petit groupe. Une distinction a été établie entre la prière multi-religieuse et la prière interreligieuse commune. Au niveau de la prière multi-religieuse, les prières des différentes traditions religieuses sont juxtaposées. En revanche, par prière interreligieuse commune, on désigne une célébration préparée et planifiée par les différentes

traditions religieuses qui peuvent toutes s'exprimer ensuite de façon spécifique. Il en est résulté que chacun de ces deux types de prière comporte des avantages et des inconvénients.

Nous sommes heureux de publier deux exposés présentés à Bangalore: celui de Pierre de Béthune, moine bénédictin, Secrétaire général du Dialogue interreligieux monastique, et celui de M. Thomas Thangaraj, Ministre de l'Eglise du Sud de l'Inde, professeur de théologie à l'Université Emory, à Atlanta, en Géorgie (USA). Nous avons également sélectionné quatre témoignages pour notre publication: ceux de Gerrie Lubbe, de Pretoria, en Afrique du Sud, engagé dans une œuvre de réconciliation aussi bien pendant qu'après l'époque de l'apartheid; d'Aminda E. Sano, membre d'une petite communauté de femmes consacrées à Zamboanga, dans le sud des Philippines, qui s'efforce d'instaurer un dialogue entre les musulmans et les chrétiens; de Ronnie Prabhu, qui anime un groupe multi-religieux qui se consacre à l'édification de la paix et de l'harmonie à Bangalore, en Inde; et de Lusmarina Campos Garcia, qui a évoqué la lutte des pauvres à Rio de Janeiro, au Brésil, en se référant en particulier à l'esprit de solidarité manifesté par les habitants à l'occasion du sommet des Nations Unies sur l'écologie. La déclaration finale, *Findings of an Exploratory Consultation on Interreligious Prayer*, est également publiée ci-après.

La réunion de Bangalore a été assez limitée. Elle n'a pas pu prendre en compte la question des fondements bibliques de la prière interreligieuse, ni examiner ses implications théologiques. Cela a fait l'objet de la troisième phase, comportant une réflexion réunissant un petit nombre de théologiens experts, à Bose, en Italie. Nous présentons deux conférences prononcées à l'occasion de cette rencontre: celle de Franco Sottocornola, Directeur de Seimeizan – centre de dialogue interreligieux au Japon – portant sur la prière interreligieuse considérée dans une perspective biblique, et celle de J. Russel Chandran, professeur de théologie, à Bangalore, en Inde, qui explore ce thème dan le contexte de la théologie chrétienne des religions. La déclaration finale de Bose est également incluse dans cette revue.

Pour compléter cette publication, des articles ont été sollicités de trois théologiens chrétiens: George Pulikkottil (orthodoxe), Gavin D'Costa (catholique) et Wesley Ariarajah (méthodiste). Nous leur avions fait parvenir tous les exposés et les deux déclarations finales afin qu'ils nous fassent part de leurs réflexions à partir du point de vue de leur tradition religieuse spécifique.

Il nous faut cependant reconnaître les limites de ce projet d'étude conjointe. Avant tout, au cours de la première phase, les bases de notre enquête étaient assez réduites, spécialement du côté catholique. Ensuite, nous avions décidé de ne pas essayer de traiter des questions touchant aux offices cultuels d'une autre religion ou concernant la présence d'autres croyants au culte chrétien. Notre attention s'en tenait à la prière en dehors du culte formel. En troisième lieu, il est impossible d'adopter un document faisant autorité en matière de prière interreligieuse pour tous les chrétiens. Il revient à chaque Eglise de prendre ses propres décisions en la matière. Cependant aujourd'hui toutes les Eglises sont confrontées à cette question. En tenant compte de ses implications doctrinales, elles doivent fournir des directives pastorales à leurs membres. Nous espérons que ce projet d'étude aura fait le tour des différents aspects de la question, mettant en relief ses points positifs mais aussi les zones d'ombre où les doutes demeurent, fournissant ainsi une orientation pour la pratique de la prière interreligieuse.

Michael L. FITZGERALD (CPDI)
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INFORMATION

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Situating the Theme

Research Papers

The Bond of Peace, A few Theological Reflections about Interreligious Prayer

Pierre F. DE BETHUNE

Editor's Note: *Pierre F. de Béthune is a Benedictine Monk and the Secretary General of "Dialogue Interreligieux Monastique" (DIM).*

Interreligious prayer is a recent practice but it is possible already to make theological reflexions concerning its legitimacy, its doctrinal bases and its place in the dialogical movement. I will base myself chiefly upon the experience of monks and more particularly my own practice of zen meditation. I will try to confront these data with the teaching of the Gospel.

I – A Recent Practice in the Church

At the outset a fundamental question must be raised. Is it not opportunism that prompts us to do to-day what was always prohibited in the past? Can one all of a sudden justify what seemed scandalous only a few years ago? *Communicatio in sacris* used to be considered "the abomination of desolation" (cfr. Dn 11,31). How many Christians went through martyrdom because they would not sacrifice or pray to idols? Besides, Saint Paul has said some definitive words on this matter: "What communion hath light with darkness? What concord hath Christ with Belial?" (2 Co 6,14-15) Indeed, he also says: "We know that an idol is nothing in the world and that there is no other God but one" (1 Co 8,4). Idols are but vanity and nothingness. Worse still, they are devils, and he concludes: "I would not that ye should have fellowship with devils." (1 Co 10,20)

One could quote a number of other texts from Saint Paul's, Saint John's or Saint Peter's Epistles down to the last page of the New Testament: "Without the dogs and sorcerers, whoremongers and murderers, idolaters and whosoever loveth and maketh a lie!" (Ap 22,15) Is it possible to come back over a question which has received such a definitive answer?

But there is the experience of to-day's Christians.

In quite different context all of us have been brought to pray with believers of other religions, and we know before God that this experience is good and beautiful. I was able to participate in the Day of Prayer for Peace, ten years ago, at Assisi, together with the Holy Father, the Dalaï Lama, the

Archbishop of Canterbury and one hundred and forty heads of churches and communities of believers. We found it was not only a wonderful but also a most necessary initiative for our time.

Personally I have been practising zen meditation every day for twenty-five years. This practice which was a casual discovery has gradually become important in my monastic life. It is an experience of radical silence at the heart of an existence in which the Word of God is paramount. I think I can say that this type of meditation practised as a Christian, but in explicit communion with Buddhists, has rejuvenated my religious practice by challenging it to be utterly simple and open.

We are thus witnesses and actors of this evolution or rather revolution which is a major provocation for our theology. It compels us to make a general revision and, first of all, a courageous re-reading of our history.

As a matter of fact, when we look at the other face of this indignant rejection of all form of recognition of other religions, what do we see all along the history of the churches? Apart from a few, but rare, beautiful exceptions, we discover a massive, contemptuous ignorance of them, a hardly evangelical arrogance, often even a scandalous violence which mars the witness of faith. What truth is it which drives people to such rage against those who do not adhere to it? Can God be honored by all we thought we had to do in order to avenge his honor?

Now these are not just "blunders", excesses of zeal of well-intentioned but ill-informed people. No! These hateful practices are the logical outcome of the doctrine mentioned above when it is applied unilaterally by those who hold power. So we must begin by assuming this history and expressing our repentance in that respect, in the name of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Then we will be able to make a fresh start with our theological reflexion. However we won't start from scratch. We must take quite seriously the great reticences and warnings of past theologians because they were dictated by the desire to give all glory to God alone, but we must examine them in to-day's context and, above all, we must submit them anew to the judgement of the gospels.

II – It is the Gospel which Impels us to Reconsider Matters

If we insist on reconsidering our attitude towards other religions it is not out of opportunism but out of faithfulness to the Gospel. Indeed we must return to the Gospel to-day and meditate over the attitudes of Jesus himself towards strangers, in order to answer in our turn to the calls they address to us. This is a grace of our time.

Nostra Aetate invites us also from its first paragraph to "reconsider the attitude (*attentius considerat*) of the Church towards other religions" and to "take into greater consideration (*imprimis considerat*) what men have in common and which impels them to live their destiny together".

Without opposing the gospels to the epistles and to tradition, let me consider now the special emphasis Jesus laid on meeting and welcoming the other. A closer study will enable us to discover fundamental Christian attitudes which have not been sufficiently devoloped afterwards. I will briefly mention two in this presentation.

II.1. – *Evangelizing and Hospitality*

Our Christian missions, especially since the sixteenth century, used to consider others as persons to be converted, only respectable in so far as they might become ours. This was ignoring the way Christ acted. When he sends his disciples to announce the Kingdom he asks them first to take into full account the persons whom they address. He invites them first to ask and receive *hospitality*. The disciples take nothing with them and therefore rely on the generosity of their hosts. "In this same house remain eating and drinking such things as they give" (Lk 10:7). Hospitality is an exchange: one must not begin to give before one has received. Yes, "It is more blessed to give than to receive" (Ac 20:35). But *it is more urgent to receive than to give* when one really wants to receive a brother. And receiving the other is at the heart of the Gospel. This welcoming is in itself already Good News. In this context the disciples can truly say: "The Kingdom of God is come nigh unto you" (Lk 10:7)

The many occasions which are given to us to-day to meet strangers – people of other races or other religions, – are a chance to rediscover this aspect of Christ's teaching. Christians, and Israelites before them, have always received much from others, their culture, their philosophy and even their religion, but without daring to acknowledge this, as if shame was attached to receiving. Today the moment has come to admit it and to "rejoice in the truth" (1 Co 13:6), wherever it might come from.

There we have a first solid theological basis for sharing prayer with our hosts; we cannot limit ourselves to receiving from them food and drink; we must also receive what is most precious to them: their means of communing with God. When they express themselves within the frame of hospitality our hosts are mysteriously God's Messengers. In so far as they welcome us, it is good to associate ourselves to their prayer, and as a consequence we are happy to receive them in our turn in our prayer, in the name of the Gospel.

Let us observe here that the practice of hospitality also carries limits. The most welcome guest is not everywhere at home in my house. There are places he cannot enter. Indeed we are not allowed to erase his status of a stranger. Assimilating him completely would be a lack of respect. Thus those who have not been baptized cannot participate in the Eucharistic communion and those who are not Hindus are not allowed inside the great temples. This reciprocal limitation is indeed painful, but it is part and parcel of the experience of hospitality. This is not due to lack of magnanimity, it is an expression of the respect that all have for the mystery of the other religion. Thus differences and incompatibilities are not concealed but acknowledged in a climate where "one considers mostly what men have in common", to take up again the phrase of *Nostra Aetate.* Differences are important; they must be taken into account, but without exaggerating their dividing power. In that respect another emphasis of the Gospels must be examined more attentively.

II.2. – *The Priority of Orthopraxis*

Another cause of the reticence and even horror regarding *communicatio in sacris* is the ever greater importance given to orthodoxy, the right formulation of faith.

At the time of the New Testament the balance between orthodoxy and orthopraxis was fully respected. Saint John's epistle, in an exact parallel, excludes from salvation him "that denieth that Jesus is Christ: ... he is antichrist" (1 Jn 2:22) and him "that loveth not his brothers: ... [he is] the child of the devil" (1 Jn 3:10). But afterwards exclusions because of heterodoxy will be resumed in all their rigour, whereas sometimes scandalous behaviour will no longer be a motive for exclusion from common prayer. Here again there are some noteworthy exceptions, such as, for instance, Saint Ambrose who expels the Emperor Theodosius, guilty of murder, from the Church in prayer, but the unilateral insistence on orthodoxy becomes ever more discriminatory in the course of history. Racial and political reasons are clearly paramount for this trend which, for instance, pretended to reject from the Church the non Greek Christian communities of the Middle East often opposed to the Basileus. As a result one became really obsessed with the purity of doctrine and simultaneously quite blind about orthopraxis.

But here again a closer study of the gospels will enable us to find the just relation between the confession of faith and the practice of the commandments. It is not enough to pray: "Not everyone that saith to me 'Lord, Lord', shall enter into the Kingdom of heaven (...) Many will say to me

in that day, 'Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in thy name?' (...) And then will I profess unto them I never knew you. Depart from me, you that work iniquity" (Mt 7:21-23). Indeed Jesus insists: "Let your speech be yea, yea; no, no: and that which is over and above these is of evil" (Mt 5:37). But in the parable of the two sons (Mt 21:28-31) he remarks that the one who pleases his father is the one who obeyed in fact, even though he said "No" at first. Without denying the importance of right speech, Christ attaches greater value to intention and action according to God's will.

After this survey of priorities in the Gospel we can now come back to prayer. To the extent that prayer is a confession of faith, an explicit "doxology", it is not possible to borrow the formulations of other faiths. The definitions of faith are exclusive. But if one considers the movement of prayer – this groaning of the Holy Spirit in the heart of every man who prays, or the praise that comes to the lips of every believer – this engagement in prayer can indeed be lived in communion with the faithful of other religions.

On the occasion of the Day of Prayer for Peace at Assisi in 1986 Catholic theologians had tried to make a subtle distinction, in order to reassure the faithful who were disturbed by this initiative. People would not "pray together", they would only "be together to pray". And indeed it is not possible for a Christian to subscribe to incompatible formulations of faith. But nevertheless it was evident that the Christians who attended the prayers said in front of Saint Francis' basilica were not just watching and listening respectfully! All of us were deeply engaged in one and the same movement of beseeching for peace. The hearty participation of all was not too much for such a decisive cause!

Whatever the case may be, this was a typical situation where classical theology was confronted with a new situation. If one emphasizes the conceptual contents of prayers *communicatio* is impossible. But if one pays more attention to experience and *praxis*, the communion of prayer imposes itself.

It is the attitude Christ invites us to, it seems to me, by his own attitude of respect for outcasts and strangers. Instead of excluding those who do not conform with the norms of his religion, he sees inside their hearts and can marvel at their way of expressing their trust in God. It is not to despise Christian doctrine to respect other prayer practices and to discover a real conniving with, for instance, zèn meditation or hindu *pujas.*

III – The Place of Prayer in the Dialogue

I would like to mention two practical implications of these considerations about the place of interreligious prayer in the process of interreligious dialogue.

When our committee for Monastic Interreligious Dialogue was first set up, in 1978, the mandate our Superiors had given to us was to develop the monastic aspect without venturing into the properly interreligious field, supposedly too risky and which we had to leave to theologians by trade. Was there not already so much to learn and to receive from the comparison of uses and customs of all monks? Praying with monks of other religions – as Father Henri Le Saux had taken the risk – could only come as the outcome of a slow progress which had barely begun for all monks. As a matter of fact it was with the same wariness one was proceeding in ecumenical work. Doctrinal agreeement had to be reached first before one could celebrate together.

But it appeared to us soon that such a way of proceeding was hardly respectful towards our interlocutors. Was it possible to exclude from our encounters with monks of other religions what was most important to them? So after a few years we deliberately sought to meet at the most central level. Kingdoms in the world meet on their borders and this is where they fight often; spiritual kingdoms must meet at the heart.

Common prayer is not the result of a wary approach; it is the *starting point* of true encounter. And when you stay there together, praying or meditating, the landscape of the dialogue changes radically: the Holy Spirit himself takes the initiative. It appears then that the genuine interreligious approach cannot be centred on the quest for profit – even spiritual, – but on receiving God. Interreligious dialogue thus becomes a religious experience, no longer an enriching experience, but an occasion for purifying one's heart, for evangelical impoverishment and going back to the essential.

But one has to go further still. Interreligious prayer is not just the starting point of the dialogue process, it is the *keystone*.

Here I want to be led by the trappists of Our Lady of Atlas, at Tibhirine in Algeria. They had created a prayer group with muslim friends, the *Ribât es Salâm*, 'The Bond of Peace'. Prayer is indeed the real bond between humans and the only lasting guarantee of peace. As long as dialogue cannot be realized at this level it remains crumbly, because the meeting has not yet taken place in its most essential point.

Father Christian de Chergé, the late Prior of Tibhirine monastery wrote recently: "It is always somewhat painful to see a man of prayer and interior life stop short in his dialogue with the other, stumbling on the enunciations of faith and the opacity of their incompatibilities, without succeeding in seeking the other above in the heights or down below where he is engaged by the uprightness of his submission to the work of the Spirit, in him and in the crucible of Islam. The first time a Sufi community of the neighbourhood asked to meet us – it was at Christmas 1979 – its spokesman had been careful to make

it precise because it was for sharing prayer they wanted to meet us. 'We do not want, he said, to engage in a theological dialogue with you, for it has often raised barriers which are man made. Now we feel called by God to unity. So we have to let God invent something new between us. This can be done only through prayer'. You will say, 'this is an exeptional case!' Perhaps, but this experience exists, and it is not an isolated case." Let us remark by the way that initiatives in the field of spiritual sharing are always taken in reciprocity. In this case a Muslim of the host country invited Christians to prayer, – thus fulfilling the monks' wishes.

This dialogue through prayer was destroyed ruthlessly by the murder of the seven Trappist monks, but this initiative has not been buried with them. Other believers, everywhere in the world, know they are called to continue in this direction. They know that beyond all violence, prayer is the strongest bond, because it goes through God. It is the shortest way between humans, because God is the One who is nearest to us. In our distressed, broken world it is truly "*the bond of peace*".

Biblical Perspectives on Interreligious Prayer

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INTRODUCTION*

At the consultation on Interreligious Prayer held in Bangalore two years ago, after putting together our experiences in this field, as we were trying to reflect on them, we felt the need to turn to the Word of God, to the Scriptures, for light in order to better understand this new situation in the religious life of the world, and for guidance on how to walk along this new path of Interreligious Dialogue.

This 'short paper' does not intend, of course, to give a full answer to these fundamental questions, but just to contribute to research in this field. Actually, up to now very little, I think, has been written or said on this specific issue, namely on 'Interreligious Prayer from a Biblical Perspective'[1].

On this subject, the Bangalore report noted that "While some people may use biblical texts to discourage Christian participation in interreligious prayer, others may find encouragement for the same in biblical teachings on loving one another, showing hospitality, and praying without ceasing" (n. 2, # 8). Obviously one cannot simply try to answer the question with a series of quotations from the Bible. We could always in fact end up with the 'sic et non' approach of Peter Abelard!

What I think we should try to do, is to let ourselves be guided by the whole message of the Bible, so as to find answers in harmony with it, and to try to make explicit the teaching that may be hidden in some particular texts or events of the Bible like the flower in a bud, or a whole tree in its seed.

– First, I will try to see the Bible as a source of inspiration when we, as Christians, join people of other religious traditions form some form of 'interreligious prayer'. Through this first approach the written Word of God will appear to us both as a paradigm and a resource text for 'interreligious prayer'.

* Throughout this paper quotations from the Bible are taken from *The Holy Bible*, King James Version, A.B.S., New York 1988.

[1] There are, of course, good articles and books which treat the theme of 'the Bible and the Religions' in a more general manner. For example: P. Rossano, *Dialogo e annuncio cristiano. L'incontro con le grandi religioni.* E.P. 1993.

– Secondly, reading the Bible as the revelation of the 'history of salvation', a history which is going on even today, and which will continue to unfold until the end of time, I will attempt to see how we should relate to the various moments of it, and to their various religious expressions. This approach should provide us with a theological criterion on when and how we can participate in the prayer or rites of other religious traditions.

1 – SEEKING INSPIRATION FROM THE BIBLE FOR INTERRELIGIOUS PRAYER

We will first turn to the Sacred Scriptures for inspiration on what to think about 'prayer' in other religious traditions, and how to pray with people of other faiths. Then we will consider the Bible as a 'resource' for Christians in interreligious prayer.

A) *Biblical perspectives on prayer in the religious traditions of the world.*

a) From the very beginning God speaks to all human beings.

If prayer can be thought of, or even 'defined' as, an 'inner experience and outward expression, both personal and social, of dialogue or encounter with God'[2], we learn from the Bible, that, from the very beginning, God has desired this encounter and has entered into this dialogue with all human beings. The beautiful, poetic, account of Genesis 3 shows us God speaking with Adam and Eve, that is with human beings from the very beginning of human history, and that also after their breaking away from God through sin. And Genesis 4 shows us God speaking with Cain, both before and after his terrible crime...

From the very beginning, all that is, was made by the 'Word of God' and exists as an answer to His call. God 'spoke' and everything was made. And the Spirit hovers over the abyss... to call it to a response. This 'relation with God' created through the Word becomes conscious in human beings, and the Spirit calls them to 'answer' to Him, to speak to Him. This 'encounter' with God is the very purpose of creation. This creative action of God, this call to a response, to a dialogue, to communion, continues down the ages and makes of the whole human history an 'uninterrupted dialogue', even though an unequal one, between God and human beings. Human beings, instructed, moved, 'raised' by God, like a child by its mother and father, learn to utter the name of God, to talk to Him, to pray: "And to Seth, to him also there was born a son;

[2] This is a Christian definition of prayer. Of course, each religious tradition will have its own approach and description of this outward expression of an interior religious experience.

and he called his name Enos: then began men to call upon the name of the LORD" (Gen 4:26).

God continues to speak to human beings and they, slowly, learn to know Him, to speak to Him. God speaks with Noah... God speaks with Job... Actually God "left not himself without witness" in any time or to any people (Cf. Acts 14:17) ...And among human beings many answered His call and expressed to Him their adoration, their obedience, their devotion, like the 'king and the whole people of Ninive' (Cf. Jonah 3:8); like Cornelius, the centurion of Caesarea "a devout man, and one that feared God with all his house, which gave much alms to the people, and prayed to God always" (Acts 10:2; Cf. 10:4 and 31); like all those who, in every nation, fear God and practise justice (cf. Acts 10:34-35).

b) 'God has chosen a people' (Cf. Dt 7, 6; 14, 2; etc.)

But, if it is true that the Bible knows, and teaches, about a 'dialogue' between God and human beings 'from the very beginning', it is also unmistakably true that the Bible is very explicit in pointing out that God has a plan, a project, to reveal Himself to all through His personal manifestation to a chosen people. It is the story of this people, made into a living 'symbol' of, and called to be a 'prophet' for, the whole human race, that becomes the central story of the Bible. If one reads the Bible trying to get the 'central message of it', and *from there* to understand its various parts, the details, of the history of salvation, one clearly sees that the 'chosen people' plays a central role in this history of salvation. It is to Abraham that God begins to unfold His plan, to open His mind, His heart... It is Abraham and, after him his descendants, who learn to know God better and deeper, to speak to Him, to 'pray' in a more personal, more intimate, less inadequate way. There is no doubt for the writers of the Old Testament that God has revealed Himself in a special way to Abraham, Isac and Jacob, to Moses, to the Prophets...

This fact is so evident, so strongly emphasized, that I need not dwell on it here.

As a consequence of the special Covenant with Israel, a special relationship, a new and special dialogue begins between God and His chosen people. The prayer of Israel to God is deeply inspired by His revelation. From the great, unforgettable, event of the liberation from the slavery of Egypt, God comes to be known as the 'only God', the 'creator of heaven and earth', the 'absolute master of human history', and His wonders, His 'great deeds', fill the hearts of the Israelites with wonder and admiration, but also with confidence and a deep sense of intimacy with God; and their mouths with songs of praise and blessing... There is no question that the 'prayer of the people of Israel' is

different from the prayer of all other peoples, in so far as it is born out of a new revelation of Him and a new Covenant with Him. The Israelites will be so deeply conscious of this fact, that no one else will be allowed into the Temple of Jerusalem, the 'tent of God among His people', where God dwells, and where the people of Israel pray to Him as a holy people, a priestly people, a chosen people...

It is true that all the peoples of the earth are invited to praise God, and bless Him (Cf. Psalms 47, 96, 117, etc.) but this is a clear and strong invitation to all the peoples of the earth to turn away from 'false idols' and to turn to the only true God, the 'God of Israel' (cf. for example: Is 45:15-26; Tb 13:10-17; Sir 36:1-13; Ps 87 etc.)

And one has a hard time finding in the biblical story of this chosen people of God any example of 'interreligious prayer'... The closest one gets is the ironic episode of the 'pagan sailors' asking Jonah to pray to his God too, as they were praying to their gods! (Jonah 1:5-6).

c) The 'remnant' of Israel gathered around Jesus, the Christ.

And there is no doubt in the writers of the New Testament that this dialogue between God and human beings has reached a new and final stage in the full manifestation of God through Jesus Christ. It is in Him that the 'Word of God was made flesh', so that we 'have seen His glory' (John 1:14); and through Him we have access to the Father in the Spirit (Hebr 4:14-16); we can give a new and fuller answer to His call, and speak to Him as the Spirit teaches us to do (Rom 8:15, 26); because He is the 'Word of God' to us and, at the same time, our living 'Amen', our response, to God (Cf. 2 Cor 1:20).

Jesus asks His disciples to pray in 'His name' (cf. John 14:13-14; 15:16; 16; 24-27), that is with Him, and through Him, and in Him. He unites us to His own prayer to the Father, teaching us to call God: 'Abba' (Cf. Mt 6:9; Lk 11:2), making us God's sons with Himself, through the Spirit of adoption (cf. Rom 8:14-17) which He pours forth on us (cf. John 7:39; 14:16, 26; 15:26; etc.).

The Church, faithful to this teaching of Jesus, will make her official prayer always addressing it to the Father, through His Son Jesus Christ, in the Holy Spirit.

That is why the whole marvelous story of salvation that the Bible reveals to us, the revelation of the 'mystery' of God "which in other ages was not made known unto the sons of men, as it is now revealed unto his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit" (Eph 3:5), culminates in the proclamation and the realization of God's will "that in the dispensation of the fullness of times he might gather together all things in Christ, both which are in heaven, and which are on earth; even in him... and hath put all things under his feet, and gave him

to be the head over all things to the Church, which is his body, the fullness of him that filleth all in all..." so that "now, in Christ Jesus, ye who sometime were far off are made nigh by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace, who hath made both one, and hath broken down the middle wall of partition between us... and that he might reconcile both unto God in one body by the cross... For through him we both have access by one Spirit unto the Father." (Eph 1:10, 22-23; 2:13-18).

And this new people of God, made up of both *'Israel'* and *'the Nations'*, the 'chosen people' and all other peoples of the earth united together in Christ by a new and everlasting covenant (Cf. Lk 22:20; Hebr 7:20 – 9:28), has been made into "a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a peculiar people; that ye should show forth the praises of him who hath called you out of darkness into his marvelous light" (1 Pt 1:9), And this 'people of God', so called in a very special way (1 Pt 1:10), known in the New Testament as the 'Church', speaks to God, who in Christ has united Himself to humanity, as the bride speaks to the bridegroom (Cf. Rev 19:7-9; 22:17). And the prophet of the Apocalypse in a sublime vision sees the Church as an immense multitude called from "every kindred, and tongue, and people, and nation" gathering before the throne of God and the Lamb that was slain singing a "new song", and with them he heard "every creature which is in heaven, and on the earth, and under the earth, and such as are in the sea, and all that are in them... saying, Blessing and honor, and glory, and power, be unto him that sitteth upon the throne, and unto the Lamb for ever and ever" (Rev. 5).

The Bible is strongly centred on Christ. In Him the 'dialogue' between God and human beings reaches its highest and most intimate point.

* * *

The global message of the Scriptures is therefore that God speaks to all human beings from the very beginning, and that all human beings are called to answer Him, and thus enabled to do so. But there is a 'history' in this 'living of God with us', there are events which human beings could neither imagine nor expect. God's love is always surprising, and always surpassing the human heart. There is a 'history' of God's dialogue with human beings, a process, an evolution, in which God chooses a people for Himself, to which God reveals Himself in a more intimate way, instructing it on how to worship Him, how to pray to Him, how to know His marvelous deeds and praise Him, thank Him for them.

Then, in "the fullness of time" (Gal 4:4) God gathers together the 'rest of Israel', around Jesus, the Christ, through Him uniting Jews and Gentiles to be

the new people of God, made of all races, to which He fully reveals Himself, and from which He receives the 'pure offering' (Mal 1:11), and the prayer made 'in the name of the Son', by the Spirit (Cf. Rom 8:26-27).

Our first conclusion is therefore as follows:

i) We have to see a continuity, a fundamental unity in this process. It is the same God Who speaks to Adam, and to Abraham, and in Christ. The Bible presents one and only one 'history of salvation'. This prompts us to ackowledge God's action in all genuine religious experience; to hold that "All genuine prayer comes from the Spirit"[3].

This way of understanding the prayers made with a sincere and devout heart by persons of whatever religious tradition, will give us a positive attitude towards them: a 'favourable presumption' on their behalf. And this understanding should prompt us, in principle, to desire to join or 'participate' with them, unless something to the contrary emerges either from the text or the context of the prayer itself. In other words, fundamentally, we should be ready and well disposed to accept prayers made by persons of other religious traditions.

ii) At the same time, as Christians, we cannot ignore what is "good and acceptable in the sight of God our Saviour; who wills that all men be saved, and come unto the knowledge of the truth. For there is one God, and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus; who gave himself as ransom for all, to be testified in due time." (1 Tim 2:3-6)

This means that, as we should be ready, and favourably disposed, to accept the prayers of other religious traditions, and even to join in them if possible, we should also be eager and ready to offer to the persons of other faiths the chance of listening to, or even, if possible, participating in a prayer made according to the Christian tradition, witnessing to the grace given to us of knowing God as Father, rejoicing in the revelation of the saving death and resurrection of Christ, moved by the Spirit of God Who has been poured forth in our hearts (Rom 5:5; Gal 4:6; etc.)

Dialogue is both 'receiving' and 'giving'; listening to the others, and speaking to them; not only recognizing what God has worked in the hearts of our fellow human beings, but also witnessing to what He has done in our own life.

That is why I believe that an 'interreligious prayer' inspired by the Bible, by its 'global message', should preferably be a prayer in which Christians listen with respect and understanding to prayers made by persons belonging to other

[3] Pope John Paul II, 'To the Roman Curia' 22/12/1986, quoted by 'Dialogue and Proclamation' document issued by the Pont. Council for Interreligius Dialogue and the Congregation for Evangelization, 19/5/1991, n. 27, in *Il dialogo interreligioso nel magistero pontificio* (F. Gioia ed,), L.E.V. Città del Vaticano 1994, n. 572.

religious traditions, and, in turn (of course, with the necessary attention to circumstances and situations), make a prayer which will be truly Christian, that is inspired and motivated by the full revelation of God in Jesus Christ.

In other words, I see a strong analogy between what 'interreligious dialogue' is meant to be and what 'interreligious prayer' should be: on the one hand it means respectful and committed attention to the manifestation of the faith-experience of other religious traditions, and, on the other hand, an expression of what Christian prayer is before persons of other faiths: of the faith, hope, love and joy that are its roots.

If circumstances suggest, another form of prayer, shared by all together, and therefore acceptable to all (also to Christians) can certainly be made. Such prayer, of course, would not bring out the 'Christian peculiarity' (nor the peculiarities of other religious traditions). It could be easier to do this at times, and it would be even more suited to particular circumstances; but I do not think that such a form should be the standard form of 'interreligious prayer'. Such a form of prayer would really be only the 'beginning' of interreligious prayer and interreligious dialogue, and we should not stop at the 'beginning' of the road of interreligious encounter!

The form of Christian participation in interreligious prayer to which the Bible invites us is a prayer faithful to the 'dialogue' of God with human beings, which through a history of revelation and salvation has in different ages and in different ways spoken to our forefathers through the prophets, but "in these last days (has) spoken unto us by his son, whom he hath appointed heir of all things, by whom also he made the worlds." (Hebr 1:1-2)

Also in 'interreligious prayer', I think, as far as possible, 'dialogue and proclamation'[4] should always go together.

B) *The Bible as 'resource' for Christian participation in interreligious prayer.*

We can now consider the Bible as a sort of 'resource book' for Christians who take part in interreligious prayer.

As the story of God's dialogue of salvation with humankind, the Bible narrates the unfolding, always deeper, always higher, always more intimate encounter of God with all human beings; all are called to become His holy people. Consequently the Bible contains words of God suited to various religious situations of human beings: readings, prayers, texts for meditation, invitations to a personal and communal encounter with God, to celebration, to deep mystical experience, to full communion with God... And, as a history of

[4] In the spirit of the document 'Dialogue and Proclamation' especially nn. 77-89, in *Il dialogo interreligioso nel magistero pontificio*, nn. 1001-1002.

salvation of all humankind, the Bible contains texts suited for prayer for people in different stages of their religious history. In other words, I think that the Bible can provide us with suitable texts in many situations when, as Christians, we are called to participate in interreligious prayer. I will try here to give some practical suggestions about the use of the biblical texts in interreligious prayer.

a) Texts which can be shared by persons of different religious traditions.

If, as mentioned above, for some particular reason we think it better to present texts that can be, so to say, 'appropriated' by all, we will have to consider first of all who the participants are. In some very general way we will have to distinguish between 'theistic' and 'non theistic' religious traditions, or to put it better, between religious traditions with a more 'personal' conception of Divinity and religious traditions with a more 'impersonal' understanding of 'Absolute Reality'. Buddhism would probably be an outstanding form of the latter, while both the 'traditional religions' and the 'abrahamic religions' would belong to the first type. The Bible provides us with very suitable texts for both groups.

i) It is surprising to discover how deeply 'human', and 'universal', the language of the sapiential literature in the Bible is! The Books of Proverbs, Ben Sira (chs. 1-35, 37-43), Wisdom (chs. 1-9), and of course both Qohelet and the Canticle of Canticles, but also some Psalms, can provide very suitable texts for meditation, contemplation, proclamation, to help people of whatever religious tradition to listen to the voice of Divine Wisdom, and to bend the heart to its teachings.

Buddhists, especially those of the Zen School, always listen with a sense of deep understanding and share also texts of the New Testament, like Lk 9:23-25; 14:25-27; Gal 2:19-20...

But also the reading of many episodes of the Bible, both of the Old and New Testaments. Many of the parables of Jesus can be listened to, understood, and deeply appreciated by persons of all religious traditions, even by those who do not use 'personal' terminology to express the 'Infinite' or 'Absolute' Reality of their religious experience.

ii) In the case of participants who share in a 'theistic' or 'personal' understanding of 'Absolute Reality', the Bible would provide us with even more abundant material. The Psalms, of course, would still be a very rich resource book for prayer addressed to God. It is a 'prayerbook' also particularly suited to express human feelings in all different situations, both individual and social, of suffering and joy, hope and despair, struggle for justice and longing for peace; and, in all situations, a deep experience of God's greatness, His mercy, His beauty...

iii) There is even greater possibility of using biblical texts in prayer meetings limited to Christians and Muslims, as the Holy Qur'an itself includes many references to persons and episodes of the Judeo-Christian Scriptures. And the entire Old Testament would be shared in meetings between Christians and Jews, taking into account, of course, the different interpretations given to it in the two traditions. From a pastoral point of view, it will always be necessary to get the advice also of persons representing the other religious traditions in the actual choice of the texts to be used together.

b) Biblical texts with which Christians (in interreligious prayer) could offer a witness to their faith and their hope.

In cases of interreligious prayer in which the different participants pray each according to his/her own tradition and offer to the others what best expresses their faith, for Christians the New Testament in particular would provide abundant material.

The actual choice of the texts in each concrete situation will have to be done keeping in mind the circumstances in which the prayer is mode, that is: the people who are taking part in it, their expectations and desires, the purpose of the gathering, the time and place, the degree of preparation and acquaintance to interreligious prayer, etc. Here I do not intend to go into practical details concerning the use of the Bible in interreligious prayer, but I would like to mention three points:

i) Biblical texts can be adapted, when their contents allow this (like, for example, in the case of the Psalms); that is, they can be used to inspire the composition of prayers more suited to the actual situation.

ii) Christian participation in interreligious prayer is certainly not limited to the Bible! The Fathers of the Church, other Christian writers, the Saints, and especially the Liturgy, can also provide excellent texts, material and inspiration. But I think that the Bible should somehow have a special place for Christians, when they take part in interreligious prayer, especially when – like the name itself indicates – the prayer is to be made by persons who, belonging to different religious traditions, come together to pray because of their faith-experience and in fidelity to it.

iii) I suggest that a sort of 'biblical lectionary' for interreligious prayer be drawn up to serve as a reference, or 'resource book' for Christians who are called to participate in interreligious prayer. Such meetings, in fact, are becoming more and more frequent. Not all people who are called to participate in such prayer-meetings have the preparation or the time to choose appropriate texts for the occasion. A choice of texts (or maybe only the references to them) and some suggestions for their use in different circumstances would be of great

help, especially to the ordinary faithful, so that they can participate actively and suitably in interreligious prayer. Special consideration could be given to ordinary circumstances in the life of families with members belonging to different religious traditions.

2 – Interreligous Prayer seen from the biblical perspective of the 'History of Salvation'

We have seen how, according to the Bible, God's revelation and the human response to it go through a historical process of development, culminating in Christ who, in the Spirit, is both the Word of the Father made flesh and the perfect Amen to Him[5].

Now I would like to dwell more at length on the consequences that this historical perspective of salvation can have for a better understanding and evaluation of the phenomenon of interreligious prayer.

I will try to do so by singling out two themes which are extremely important for our research.

A) *The four 'covenants' and their ritual expression*[6].

The Bible, as pointed out above, is mainly concerned with the special history of salvation centred on the chosen people of God, culminating in the death and resurrection of Christ as the moment and the event of the outpouring of the Spirit for the creation of a new world, the birth of a new humankind. But it is quite evident that the Bible presents this as the history of the salvation of the whole world, meant for all the peoples of the earth. The important thing which we want to emphasize here is the historical dimension of this salvation; it is in harmony with the very nature of the whole of reality, and especially of human existence where the created world attains to its highest perfection, reaching self-consciousness and developing into freedom and love.

[5] Taking the whole 'biblical perspective' into account, I do not see any possibility for a 'pluralistic' approach to the theology of religions. A pertinent and authoritative critique to such approach can be found also in the 1996 text of the International Theological Commission: 'Christianity and the Religions', Italian transl. in *Il Regno*, 1997/3, pp. 75-83. See especially n. 17, on the question of 'prayer' in the different religious traditions.

[6] This reading of the 'history of salvation' through 'four covenants' goes back at least to Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses*, 3, 11, 8 (quoted by 'Dialogue and Proclamation' n. 25, in *Il dialogo interreligioso nel magistero pontificio* n. 949).

Now, while the Bible concentrates on the historical events of the chosen people, it also clearly indicates the presence of God and His saving activity 'from the very beginning' and down through the ages of the history of the whole of humankind.

Reading the Bible with this general perspective in mind, the biblical account appears to me clearly divided into four parts, of unequal length but connected to one another as the developing stages of the one and only salvific process in human history, each of them characterized by the establishment of a covenant proposed by God Himself.

"Father in heaven – we say in the 4th Eucharistic Prayer – ...again and again you offered a covenant to man, and through the prophets taught him to hope for salvation". Actually the Bible presents a history of salvation marked by four great covenants:

a) The Bible speaks of a covenant made by God with Noah "and with his seed after (him)... And God said: This is the token of the covenant which I make between me and you, and every living creature that is with you, for perpetual generations: I set my bow in the cloud, and it shall be a token of a covenant between me and the earth... And God said unto Noah. This is the token of the covenant, which I have established between me and all flesh that is upon the earth." (Gen 9:9-17)

b) Then the Bible dwells at length on the account of the covenant of God with Abraham: "And when Abram was ninety years old and nine, the Lord appeared to Abram, and said unto him, I am the Almighty God; walk before me, and be thou perfect. And I will make my covenant between me and thee, and I will multiply thee exceedingly. And Abram fell on his face: and God talked with him, saying, As for me, behold, my covenant is with thee, and thou shalt be a father of many nations. Neither shall thy name any more be called Abram, but thy name shall be Abraham; for a father of many nations have I made thee... And I will establish my covenant between me and thee and thy seed after thee in their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be a God unto thee and to thy seed after thee" (Gen 17:1-7, cf. chs. 15-22); "And in thy seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed.." (Gen 22:18).

c) From the 'seed of Abraham' (just like Abraham was born from the 'seed of Noah') God chose Moses and the descendants of Jacob (Israel) in Egypt, made them a living symbol for the salvation of the whole human race, freed them from slavery and death, and made with them a covenant the events of which fill all the pages of both the Old Testament and the New Testament (Cf. Ex 24:3-11).

d) Of this covenant, which the people of Israel broke again and again, Jeremiah said: "Behold the days come, saith the Lord, that I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel, and with the house of Judah: Not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers, in the day that I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt; which my covenant they broke, although I was a husband unto them, saith the Lord; But this shall be the covenant that I make with the house of Israel; After those days saith the Lord, I will put my law in their inward parts and write it in their hearts; and will be their God, and they shall be my people." (Jer 31:31-33) It was of this "new covenant" that Jesus spoke during the last supper with His disciples, when He took "the cup after supper, saying, This cup is the new testament in my blood, which is shed for you." (Lk 22:20), as the letter to the Hebrews explains in great detail and with great depth (Hebr chs. 7-10).

All this is well known, as also well known is the reading of these important texts for a Christian theology of religions[7]. What I would like to point out here is the fact that all of these covenants are marked by the ritual celebration of 'sacrifices' (Cf. Gen 8:20-21; Gen 15 and 22; Ex 24; Hebr 10)...

Fidelity to the covenant established by God with Noah, with Abraham, with the Israelites freed from the slavery of Egypt, with Christ.. is expressed by their 'descendants' by means of the renewal of these sacrificial rites... (Cf. Ex 12:21-28 and Deut 29:13 – 30:10).

In the Christian tradition we have had, at different times, a different understanding of the meaning and value of these rituals. But I suggest that we should turn to a very important text which can help us in view of a reappraisal of the religious rites in the various religious traditions of the world.

In the Roman Canon, the venerable Eucharistic prayer used by the Church since at least the second part of the IV Century[8], we find this very interesting text: "Father most merciful...look with favor on these offerings and accept them as once you accepted the gifts of your servant Abel, the sacrifice of Abraham, our father in the faith, and the bread and wine offered by your priest Melchisedech".

This part of the Roman Canon, judging from its contents and style, seems to be very ancient, going back perhaps to a time when the majority of the community was still made up of Christians of Jewish origin!

[7] Cf. Jean Daniélou, *Les Saints 'payens' de l'Ancien Testament* Seuil, Paris 1956; Id. *Le mystére du Saint des nations*, Seuil, Paris 1953 (1966[3]).

[8] Cf. Pelagio Visentin, "Eucaristia", *Nuovo Dizionario di Liturgia* (a cura di D. Sartone e A. Triacca) Ed. San Paolo, Cinisello Balsamo 1988, p, 455.

On the walls of the churches of Saint Vitalis and of Saint Apollinaris in Classe (dedicated in 547 and 549, respectively, by the Archbishop Maximilian under the Emperor Justinian) in Ravenna, we can still admire the beautiful mosaics showing the scene of the sacrifices offered by Abel, Abraham and Melchisedech with a clear reference to the text of the Roman Canon!

"À Saint-Vital, Abel et Melchisédek présentent leur offrande de part et d'autre de l'autel, tandis que la main de Dieu, dans la nuée lumineuse, la reçoit. Un autre ensemble est consacré à Abraham, offrant l'hospitalité aux trois anges et levant le couteau sur Isaac; là encore la main de Dieu apparaît dans la nuée, mais c'est pour arrêter celle d'Abraham. A Saint-Apollinaire-in-Classe, les trois sacrificateurs sont rassemblés autour de l'autel sur lequel sont disposés le pain et le vin; Melkisédec, en vêtements sacerdoteaux, préside l'offrande. L'intention typologique de l'artiste est ici évidente avec la référence qui s'impose à la Prière eucharistique romaine: 'Comme il t'a plu d'accueillir les présents d'Abel le Juste, le sacrifice de notre père Abraham et celui que t'offrit Melkisédek, ton grand prêtre'. Les trois sacrifices anciens n'ont ils pas été 'portés à leur achèvement dans l'unique et parfait sacrifice de la croix' (Prière sur les offrandes du seizième dimanche du temps ordinaire)?"[9]

Now this liturgical text, used for so many centuries by the Roman rite of the Catholic Church, brings us to some important considerations.

– God accepts the sacrifices of Abel as he accepts those of Noah (Gen 8:20-22), of Abraham and of Melchisedech.

– The Church sees in these sacrifices prophetic symbols of the redeeming sacrifice of Christ.

– The Church asks that her own offering of the body and blood of Christ, of His sacrifice, be acceptable to God, like those ancient sacrifices have been!

Can we deduce from this the recognition in these ritual religious expressions of a sort of 'proleptic value', an anticipation, both prophetic and pedagogic, of the Christ-event, in which 'the sacrifices of the ancient economy came to fulfillment' (Cf. Hebr chs. 8-10; The Roman Liturgy: 16th Sunday 'per annum')?

I suggest that we should think so. Just as we can think that the covenant of God with the very first human beings (covenant with Noah), the covenant with Abraham, the covenant with the people of Israel through Moses, remain valid forever, and they are not 'abolished' but 'fulfilled' in Christ, so we can

[9] Pierre Jounel, "L'iconographie de Ravenne. Sa signification liturgique", in *La Maison Dieu* 158, 1984, pp. 83-84.

hold that these ritual expressions of human religious experience, as signs of fidelity to a covenant with God, retain their meaning, their value and their goodness, until they are 'abolished' because 'fulfilled' in the participation through faith in the sacrifice of Christ.

But while 'objectively' – so to say – this abolition/fulfillment occurs in the *'hapax'* event of Christ's death and resurrection, 'subjectively' – so to say –, that is in the concrete life of a person or of a people, this event occurs when actually, in a sufficient way, the 'Gospel' of Christ is brought into the historical experience of these persons and peoples[10]. Up to that moment (the occurrence of which is often difficult or even impossible to judge), the previous covenant *and the religious expressions of it* retain – for those persons and peoples – their salvific value and role, and should be recognized, respected and appreciated as such by Christians.

This way of thinking about the religious expressions (prayers and rituals) of other religious traditions would allow us to look at them with a better understanding and greater empathy.

We could recognize in the 'sacrifice of Abel' and in the 'sacrifice offered by Noah' the symbol of all the religious expressions of the traditional religions, historically the first concretization of a human religious experience. And in the 'sacrifice of Abraham', the symbol of all the religious expressions of his descendants, the Jews and the Muslims... Finally in the mysterious 'sacrifice offered by Melchisedech' we could see a symbol of all those forms of religious experience that God has stirred up with His free and unpredictable love in the long history of humankind... It is not at all strange that the 'priestly role' of Christ himself has been seen and explained by the Bible in the line of the 'priesthood of Melchisedech' (Cf. Hebr 7).

Thus we should acknowledge with gratitude to God, and rejoice, that the peoples (*'Gentes'*) of the world have their covenant with God from the beginning, and religious expressions of their fidelity to it, just as they have their 'prophets'[11]. The descendants of Abraham have a special covenant... And that they do, by a very special election by God, being sons and daughters of Israel. All this is part of the one and only history of salvation of the world, and is attributed by the Bible to God's own initiative, to His covenants with humankind.

[10] Cf. Karl Rahner, "Das Christentum und die nichtchrislichen Religionen", *Schriften zur Theologie* V, Benziger, Zürich 1952, pp. 136-153.

[11] St. Augustine, Contra Faustum 19, 2 (PL 42, 348), quoted by Pope Paul VI in an address to a general audience on 9/12/1964. *Il dialogo interreligioso nel magistero pontificio*, n. 206.

* * *

But if we want to be faithful to the Bible, and to take the whole message of the Bible as our guide in thinking and understanding this somewhat new problem in the life of the Christian Church, namely interreligious prayer, we have to accept and think over carefully also other teachings given to us by the written word of God with equal and even greater emphasis! I am referring here to the strong, unequivocal, and at times even violent, critique by the word of God of all forms of idolatry, of all sort of degradation of religious expression, of the dangerous nature of any contact with such forms of worship. Thus, for example, and in a special way, the covenant of Mount Sinai is seen clearly as a 'separation' from the other peoples in view of a 'purification', and a 'consecration' for a special encounter with God, and for a form of worship that He Himself reveals to Israel (Cf. Ex chs. 19-31; Deut chs. 12-16; etc.)

The law of Moses strongly warns the people of Israel against worshipping 'other gods' and about avoiding any contamination with the religious practices of other peoples. The texts in this sense are so numerous and so well known that it is not necessary to quote them here.

Every year, celebrating the Passover, the Israelites sing Psalms 114 and 115: "Our God is in the heavens: he hath done whatsoever he hath pleased. Their idols are silver and gold, the work of men's hands. They have mouths, but they speak not: eyes have they, but they see not... They that make them are like unto them; so is every one that trusteth in them... O Israel, trust thou in the Lord... Ye are blessed of the Lord which made heaven and earth." (Ps 115:3-5, 8-9, 15)

And the pious Jew would always pray: "O my soul, thou hast said unto the Lord, Thou art my Lord... Their sorrows shall be multiplied that hasten after another god: their drink offerings of blood will I not offer, nor take up their names into my lips." (Ps 16:2, 4).

The prophets go even further... The whole prophetic tradition is an inexorable attack against the 'gods of nations', which are not gods at all; against worshipping them; against even naming them... The fiercest struggle against these 'alien gods' belongs of course to the period of time when the tribes of Israel had just entered into the land of Canaan and had to share it somehow with its other inhabitants. But this struggle of the prophets against 'the worship of idols' goes on unabated and relentless all through the history of Israel, down to the times of the book of Daniel, and to the Maccabees who will rather die than worship idols...

A highly dramatic moment of this history is the struggle of Elijah against the false prophets of Baal culminating in the open challenge to them on Mount Carmel (1 Kings 18:16-40).

The Second Isaiah preaches and writes mockingly of the making of idols and the foolishness of worshipping them (Is 44:9-20).

We need not go into detail to describe this radical and unyielding opposition of the prophets to any compromise with other religious traditions. Even though we can see the 'pedagogical' reason of this rigorous criticism, intended to bring Israel to a deeper knowledge of God in view of its special mission, we cannot easily dismiss it as a contingent or historically conditioned phenomenon. It is an essential part of the biblical message which we have to take into serious consideration. The more so that this 'prophetic critique' of the common forms of worship found among the 'nations' or 'peoples' of the world, goes on into the New Testament, and enters into the life of the Church. I think that this general attitude of suspicion and even condemnation in face of the forms of prayer and worship of the 'other religious traditions' was quite justified by the widespread existence of idol-worship and other depraved forms of religious expression, and by the need of stirring Israel away from this very common, but unworthy, popular religiosity. The people of Israel, especially in the beginnig of its new history in the land of Canaan, had to be saved with unswerving force from yielding to the strong temptation that such forms of worship constituted for a more spiritual, less visible, higher form of religiosity to which Israel had been called. We should also concede that most forms of popular religiosity in the ancient civilizations both of the Middle East and of the Greco-Roman world, were really forms of base idolatry, mingled with a lot of superstition, and even immoral practices. Beacuse of this fact, however, we should not unduly project 'a priori' a negative judgement on all forms of religious tradition. A sound and critical 'discernment' is necessary.

* * *

Another point has to be made here in view of fully establishing what the 'biblical perspectives' on interreligious prayer are, namely the unquestioned conviction of the New Testament writings that in Jesus Christ, the decisive word of God to the world, the 'eschatological event' in the history of salvation and all former convenants are brought to fulfillment, and all forms of religious expression are brought to perfection (Cf. Col 1; Eph chs. 1 and 2; Hebr 1:1-4 etc.) As a consequence, while it is right and just to judge positively, to respect, and to value genuine expressions of other forms of religious traditions, these will not be sufficient for a Christian[12].

[12] On this question see the Letter of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, 15/10/1989, 'On some aspects of Christian meditation', in *Il dialogo interreligioso nel magistero pontificio*, nn. 894-924.

Just as the 'Law of Moses' has been brought to a new perfection by the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and the ritual celebrations of the Old Testament made obsolete for the disciples of Christ by those of the New (Cf. Hebr 8:13) in view of a new worship in 'spirit and in truth' (Cf. John 4:23), so have all other forms of religious expression been summed up and made perfect in the sacrifice of Christ on the Cross, and in His prayer to the Father.

This means that, on the one hand, a Christian, after due discernment, will be able to look upon the various forms of prayer of other religious traditions with sincere empathy and, if compatible with his/her faith, even share in them; but, on the other hand, it will always be necessary for him/her to nourish his/her own faith and life at the source of 'christian' spirituality which is the Gospel of Jesus Christ and the living tradition of the Church (the Liturgy especially), and, also, that he/she – in a true interreligious dialogue, a true interreligious prayer – present to the others, according to the situations, his/her characteristic form of prayer inspired by Jesus and His Gospel, announcing and celebrating His death and resurrection.

This, of course, is the 'Christian way' of participating in interreligious prayer. Every other religious tradition will have its own characteristic way, expressing its own identity and self-comprehension. Only when people come together to pray in full fidelity to their own faith, and offering to the other an expression of it while, at the same time, opening their heart with sincere respect and interest to the other, is there true 'interreligious prayer'. As already said before, this does not exclude the possibility, according to circumstances, of having people of different religious traditions come together to pray using texts or symbols which do not belong exactly to any particular religious tradition, but can be accepted by all. Such form of prayer will also be useful, and at times, the only one possible. But it will not by itself bring out fully all the rich possibilities of 'interreligious prayer'.

B) *'To worship in spirit and in truth' (John 4:23)*

The other biblical text we would like to take up for special consideration is John 4:23. It is a well known and oft-quoted text. It is not an easy one to understand and to explain[13], but it is certainly an important one for a theology of prayer in general and, as I will try to show, also for 'interreligious prayer' in

[13] A wide ranging exploration of the history of the interpretation of this text in Pier Cesare Bori (Ed.), *In Spirito e Verità. Letture di Giovanni 4, 23-24*, E.D., Bologna 1996, See also *'The Word of God – Source of life. Final Statement of the 5th Plenary Assembly of the Catholic Biblical Federation'*, Hong Kong 2.12 July 1996.

particular. Here again we cannot dwell at length on the exegesis of the text, but only try to take inspiration from it in view of a better understanding and praxis of interreligious prayer.

First of all we will have to take this word of Jesus within the context of prophetic tradition, going back at least to Isaiah who criticizes all forms of ritualistic or merely external worship. One has only to remember texts like those of Isaiah 1:10-20; Am 5:21-27; Hos 6:6; 8:11-13... Let us quote just one of them, the beautiful text of Hosea 6:6: "For I desired mercy, and not sacrifice; and the knowledge of God more than burnt offerings".

Also the Psalms attest to this spiritual tradition. Among them particularly the sequence of Pss. 50 and 51: "For thou desirest not sacrifice; else would I give it: thou delightest not in burnt offering. The sacrifices of God are broken spirit: a broken and a contrite heart, O God, thou wilt not despise" (Ps 51:16-17).

It is this line of spirituality that comes to full expression in the Gospel of Jesus. The Letter to the Hebrews develops this approach in depth (ch. 10). Quoting Ps 40:7-8 (from the text of the Septuagint) the writer of the letter puts its words in the mouth of Christ: "Wherefore, when he comes into the world, he saith, Sacrifice and offering thou wouldest not, but a body hast thou prepared me: In burnt offerings and sacrifices for sin thou hast had no pleasure. Then said I, lo, I come (in the volume of the book it is written of me) to do thy will, O God." (Hebr 10:5-7). The Author goes on from here drawing very pertinent and important conclusions for Christian worship and Christian life, down to the end of the letter: "Wherefore Jesus also, that he might sanctify the people with his own blood, suffered without the gate... By him therefore let us offer the sacrifice of praise to God continually, that is, the fruit of our lips, giving thank to his name. But to do good and to communicate forget not: for with such sacrifices God is well pleased." (Hebr 13:12-16).

This is the 'spiritual worship' (of which the visible worship is the visible sign and the means where the Spirit of God is at work), sincere and truthful, the 'worship in spirit and in truth' pleasing to the Father, that Jesus speaks about to the woman of Samaria. A worship which is not bound to any place, therefore, be it Mount Garizim or even Jerusalem, but which consists in uniting oneself to Christ, in His Spirit, offering oneself up with Him to the Father in love, and bending with Him in love on all human beings to be a sign of God's love for them...

Like the prophets, and Jesus Himself, have taught, it is walking in justice, peace, and love that we become a living sacrifice to God (Cf. Rom. 12:1ss).

The long and marvelous story of God present in human history and told us by the Bible brings us to these heights of religious experience, away from

any form of 'ritualism' as well as from any 'pseudo-mysticism', towards the worship that pleases God, and is worthy of human beings.

Now I think that in interreligious prayer we Christians have, for our part, the duty to cooperate to make 'prayer', or 'worship', not a closed, self complacent, merely emotional experience, but an open, dynamic, life-transforming encounter with that Absolute Reality which we call God, whom we know to be Love, a love which does not bear injustice or hatred, falsity or deceit. Through His prophet Isaiah He still speaks to us and says: "When ye spread forth your hands, I will hide mine eyes from you; yea, when ye make many prayers, I will not hear: your hands are full of blood. Wash ye, make you clean; put away the evil of your doings from before mine eyes; cease to do evil; learn to do good; seek judgment, relieve the oppressed, judge the fatherless, plead for the widow... (Is 1:15-17).

Our Christian contribution to interreligious prayer, if it wishes to be faithful to the biblical revelation, worthy of God whom the Bible reveals to us, should strive to be a prayer made 'in spirit and in truth', cooperating with all other religious traditions so that it becomes a moment of true spiritual experience and commitment, an encounter with God and service to His plan of salvation; it becomes a feast of peace and brotherhood to which all human beings are invited by God Himself; and of which the disciples of Christ are, in a special way, by their faith in Christ and their Baptism in His Spirit, called to be the messengers and the servants (Cf. Mt 22, 2).

Prayer 'in spirit and in truth' should be, as much as possible, like the experience of Moses, who approaching the burning bush met with the burning love of God for His people, and staying with God on the mountain, learned from God Himself how to love His people, so as to be able to become an instrument of God in the liberation and transformation of the people of God. It should be more like the prayer of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, after which he stood up and walked to the cross.

Conclusion

After this summary 'reading' of the Bible, to find in it inspiration and suggestions for interreligious prayer, we can come, I think, to three conclusions.

A) The Bible teaches that God has deigned to speak with human beings and to make with them convenants from the very beginning and down through the ages of human history. And the Bible also shows human beings answering to God, by His grace, with prayers and even sacrifices that please God. In such

genuine prayers we can recognize and appreciate the action of the Spirit. This biblical perspective should allow Christians to have a fundamentally open and positive approach to 'prayer' or other religious expressions in the various religious traditions of the world, and, consequently, also towards the possibility and value of 'interreligious prayer'.

B) The Bible, however, also points out the fact of a widespread decadence in human religious life and strongly denounces all forms of idolatry and immoral forms of worship, asking us to be extremely vigilant and uncompromising in the face of them. This biblical message which goes through all of the Old and the New Testament, requires from us a keen sense of discernment and also the courage of a firm stand vis-à-vis forms of worship or prayer to which we as Christians could not consent. It also asks us to always 'try' and purify the genuineness of our own religious expressions at the fire of the 'Gospel of Christ'. It is important that our own contribution to interreligious prayer be in the line of a continuous search for 'worship in spirit and in truth'.

C) The Bible, finally, points unmistakably to Jesus Christ as the full and final revelation of God to humankind (Cf. John 1:18) and the only mediator of our salvation (Cf. 1 Tim 2:5). He has taught us to pray in His name, and to share His own attitude to the Father in Heaven. His 'Gospel' inspires our prayer as well as our life which may remain faithful to Him by praying with Him and through Him, in His Spirit.

In interreligious prayer, if this is possible and advisable, we should favour the form of mutual witness, so as to discover what is proper and unique in other religious traditions, learning from them whatever is good, beautiful, true, and useful in order to know God better and to love Him more, while, at the same time, offering to the brothers and sisters of other religious traditions the witness of our faith and the reason of our hope, as well as sharing with them, as far as possible, the service of our love and the source of our joy.

In other words, interreligious prayer, like interreligious dialogue, of which it is a vital moment and aspect, should allow different religious traditions to meet so that each of them can present to the other its own faith and its own spiritual experience, thus allowing for mutual knowledge, mutual inter-action, and common research for common growth towards an always purer, always less imperfect, form of prayer.

A Theological Reflection on the Experience of Interreligious Prayer

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Let me begin this presentation with a few preliminary remarks. First of all, what I am providing here is *a* Christian theological reflection and not *the* reflection. This is true because there are different ways of looking at the issue of interreligious prayer from the Christian theological point of view. This variety is due to the history and location of the theologian, the confessional and theological stance that is taken, the resources that are appropriated and used by the theologian, and the methodology that is adopted. I come from the Church of South India which is made up of several ecclesial traditions. My mother tongue is Tamil. My area of academic interest over the last fifteen years has been in the area of the interfacing between Christian theology and Saivite philosophy and religion. I have been actively involved in programs of interreligious dialogue and prayer in the city of Madurai, especially through the activities of the Tamilnadu Theological Seminary, and the Department of Gandhian Studies at the Madurai-Kamaraj University, and more recently in the Department of Interreligious Dialogue of the same University. My intense dialogical involvement has been primarily with Hindus, and particularly the Saivites of Tamilnadu. Thus the resources for my theological reflection come both from my own ecclesial tradition and a host of interreligious dialogue experiences. My theological reflection is often guided methodologically by the central theological affirmation that God is God and hence all that is not God needs to be questioned, challenged, and constantly revised. This includes our "theology" of interreligious prayer itself.

The phrase 'interreligious prayer' can bring to mind, to several Christians, at least five different scenarios. First, Christians' participation in the worship of other religious traditions can be seen as interreligious prayer. When I go with my friend to the Hindu temple, I find myself in a situation of interreligious prayer. When we come to the inner sanctuary, my friend prostrates before the image of the goddess, and I stand near him and mutter a prayer within myself. Quite often, that prayer is: O Lord, I thank you for this friend whom you have given me! This is an "inter" situation because two distinct religious traditions come into play in that setting of prayer for me.

Second, the churches in India and elsewhere have been encouraged to use the resources of other religions in their prayer and worship. Such use of rituals, gestures, readings, and prayers from another religion turns Christian worship and prayer into interreligious prayer. Quite recently, in one of the worship services that I led in Bishop Cannon Chapel of Emory University, Atlanta, Georgia, I had a reading from the Upanishads in addition to a reading from the Bible. Without my asking her, the woman who read the Upanishadic passage said at the end of the reading, "The word of God for the people of God!" The congregation responded, "Thanks be to God!" Right at that moment, most people suddenly realized that they were not simply participating in Christian worship but rather in an interreligious prayer. Some had questions as to whether one could honestly claim the Upanishad as the "word of God" within a setting of Christian worship.

Third, I have participated in many interreligious dialogue meetings which end with prayer offered according to the various religious traditions represented in the dialogue. For example, a Hindu would recite a hymn from *Tevaram*, or *Tiruvacagam*, a Muslim a prayer in Arabic, and a Christian a hymn, an extempore prayer, or a written prayer. While one religionist offers a prayer according to his/her tradition, others place themselves as "participant observers." The other religionists are keenly aware that they do not pray that way, but are willing to stand by that brother or sister in a mode of solidarity. One cannot really claim that we are *praying* together, rather one can definitely assert that we *are together* in prayer. The "inter" character of the scenario comes from the fact that we are together in one place joining in several and perhaps parallel acts of prayer.

Fourth, there are gatherings where a Christian is invited to offer a prayer which has a deep awareness of the presence of people of other religious traditions. Though the person who prays is clearly rooted in a particular religious tradition, he/she attempts to offer an "interreligious" prayer that exhibits a genuine sensitivity to the worship tradition of other religionists. For example, I was asked to offer an "inclusive" benediction at the Inauguration Ceremony of the new President of Emory University last year. After some words of commitment to learning, caring, justice, and community, I ended the benediction by saying, "That One, The One Who is called by many names, and yet meets us as the nameless One, That One, May that One surround us and sustain us in the years to come, Let it be so, Let it be so, Amen, Amen." While there were a few Christians and a few people of other religions who thanked me for offering a benediction that they could say Amen to, one of my friends who was present on the occasion took exception to my not naming the name of Christ on such a wonderful occasion for witness.

Fifth, people of different religious traditions may plan, prepare, and participate in a prayer which all those who participate can or may claim as their prayer. All the differing religionists participate fully in each aspect of that prayer, whether it is ritual, reading, or a prayer. I have participated several times in the interreligious prayer that happens on the lawn of Gandhi Museum in Madurai every Friday at 6:00 p.m. for the last ten years or so. Here is a prayer which is planned by a group of Christians, Muslims, Hindus and Gandhians, and the participants pool their spiritual resources together and pray together. Very often a Christian would sing an Islamic hymn, a Hindu a Christian prayer, and so on.

These are the five scenarios I have come across when it comes to interreligious prayer. Interreligious prayer can happen in all these five situations, namely, when we participate in the worship of another religious tradition, when we employ the resources of another tradition in Christian worship, when we join together with others and offer our particularistic prayers, when we offer an "inclusive" prayer on behalf of a multi-religious audience, and when we pray together as one people. A Christian theological reflection can approach the challenge of these differing situations of interreligious prayer from three different but inter-connected angles. The first angle of vision is the theology of worship and prayer in the Christian tradition. How do we understand interreligious prayer from the point of view of the Christian theology of worship? In other words, can interreligious prayer be considered as prayer? The second angle is that of a Christian theology of religions. How do we perceive interreligious prayer with our Christian perception of the multi-religious situation? To put it differently, can interreligious prayer be considered as prayer to God? The third angle of vision comes from the pastoral concern of the Christian church. Do we need interreligious prayer? Does interreligious prayer enhance the spiritual life of a Christian? Or does it divert and mislead a Christian from the true worship of God in spirit and in truth? How do we offer pastoral assistance to those who find themselves in situations of interreligious prayer?

1 – Theology of Worship

Christian worship is governed and guided by several mo(ve)ments. The first and foremost in Christian worship is the moment or posture of response. Worship happens as a response to what God has already done in Creation, in Christ, and among ourselves. So, in a sense, every Christian worship is "eucharistic" – an act of thanksgiving. This implies that worship is also at that

very moment of response a moment of remembrance. Both within the Jewish tradition and within the Christian liturgical development, the act of remembrance has played a significant role in orienting and shaping our prayer. God is a God "who brought you out of the land of Egypt, the land of slavery," and God is a God who is the Father of Jesus Christ who, in the event of Christ Jesus, has reconciled the world to God's own self. Thus every Christian prayer is sustained by the grand story of God's salvific act in the world through Christ Jesus. In this sense, every prayer stands as a moment of celebration. Hence the formula "through Jesus Christ our Lord" becomes the backbone of Christian prayer.

Christian prayer has a moment of togetherness and participation as well. This again is the "eucharistic" character of Christian worship. Prayer is a corporare act of turning to God; that corporateness is expressed through the togetherness and fellowship. One may call this the sacramental moment of Christian prayer and worship. My neighbor, the bread, the wine, the place, and all that is present at that moment become sacramental – carriers of the Divine presence and grace. Christian prayer has two other moments too – a moment of proclamation, and a moment of anticipation. As Paul reminds his readers in the I Corinthians 11, when we pray and worship we announce the death of Christ and await his coming. This is not true for the Eucharist alone; it is true of every prayer and worship. In more Reformed traditions, this moment happens especially in the preaching of the word. As I have outlined here, we have in Christian prayer the re-enacting of the Divine Drama in all its fullness through the mo(ve)ments of response, remembrance, togetherness, participation, proclamation, and anticipation. All these are held together within the Christic incarnational focus of all Christian prayer.

If this is what we mean by Christian prayer, what do we say about interreligious prayer? If one locates oneself primarily within the above-explained "salvation symphony in six movements," is it possible at all to participate in interreligious prayer? Does not one have to move out of one's own story line and place oneself in another or multiple stories? If togetherness demands a participation in a meta-narrative, do we have one such narrative? Can prayer be a corporate response to God's initiative, if we have differing stories of God's mighty acts? One can detect right away that we are into difficult issues here. Participating in the worship and prayer of other traditions appears as the betrayal of the grand narrative. The *stalapuranam* (the mythology attached to each Hindu shrine) of the Hindu temple is clearly not part of the symphony that I am listening to and responding to. Similarly, suspending the formula "through Jesus Christ our Lord" signals a shying away from the moments of remembrance and proclamation in prayer.

While I acknowledge the difficulties that emerge from the angle of a theology of worship, I am equally aware that most of us here have participated in interreligious prayer and have experienced divine grace, sense of togetherness, spiritual enhancement, and so on. That means what we need is a theology of worship which can take account of the deep experience of piety and grace in an interreligious prayer. We need a theology which breaks open the confines of a singular "salvation-symphony" and takes us to a festival of global music! In other words, why sing simply a Keerthanai in Kalyani when we can do a Ragamaligai in seven or eight *ragams*. Worship will have to be seen as a posture and response to the Mystery, whom we cannot name by a single name and/or celebrate with one grand narrative. Such a vision of prayer will also release us (especially Protestants) from the preoccupation with turning every prayer into an occasion for witnessing to the Christ-narrative. Christ's invitation to "worship God in spirit and in truth" will be undergirded by a theology of worship which taps more the resources of the doctrine of the Holy Spirit than simply limiting itself to the Christological motifs. I am fully aware that what I am suggesting here involves a much more detailed discussion and working out; but given the limitations of this presentation, let me move to the next area of concern.

2 – Theology of Religions

As one can see, what we have discussed under "theology of worship" begs the question of a theology of religions. How we understand the plurality of religions in the economy of God will greatly affect and influence our understanding of interreligious prayer. In recent years we have moved to a saturation point in terms of classifying theologies of religions as exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism. More and more persons do not find that classification helpful anymore. What is actually happening is that while the so-called "conservative" theologians are attempting to refine the exclusivistic position to a slightly accommodative stance, the so-called "liberal" theologians are splitting hairs as to what type of pluralism one can endorse. Mark Heim's recent work, titled, *Salvations*, is precisely addressing this issue and comes up with what he calls, "orientational pluralism." I do not want to go into classifying various theologies of religions at this point.

In the multi-religious setting we must ask: What are the issues a theology of religions needs to address with regard to interreligious prayer? One can list a variety of issues. For example, are we praying to the same God when we are engaged in interreligious prayer? If we seriously consider our language as that

which participates in the reality that it names, signifies, or creates, are we not dealing with a plurality of Gods here? If we say that God is one, and only one, are we presupposing and accepting the "classic" Hindu position, namely, Being is one; sages call it by many names? Another would be the issue of the status of the scriptures of various religions in a setting of interreligious prayer. Are all scriptures the "word of God?"

Perhaps we need a theology of religions that relativizes each religious tradition's vision of God as human and feeble approximations on the one hand, and affirms each as the Spirit's luring us all toward God through our approximations of God and God's salvific engagement in the world on the other. In other words, we need a theology of religions which does not limit God to a mathematical one and lets God be God; at the same time, a theology which never relinquishes the theological task of naming the idol as not-God. We are looking for a theology which celebrates our interreligious prayers as a way of reveling in the multi-colored, multi-layered manifestations of God, and which does not shy away from naming the idolatrous elements of our prayer that creep in the guise of offering "hospitality" to people of other faiths. Here again, as I said in the previous section, we need a lot of careful thinking and articulation.

3 – Pastoral Theology

Our pastoral theology has been worked out more often imagining our congregations in well protected Christian settings. Especially during the missionary era in India, new converts were taken out of their settings and settled in what is called "mission-compounds" or in Christian villages like the one I and my wife come from – Nazareth, and Mudalur in Tirunelveli District, Tamilnadu. As long as Christians and people of other religious traditions lived in their "ghettoes," or well-defined geographical locations, the need for or the situation of interreligious prayer was not a reality to contend with. Given the pluralistic setting of today, "abstinence" or "keeping oneself away from" does not work. People do find themselves in situations of interreligious prayer. What is the pastoral task in such a setting?

One of the tasks within the Protestant churches is a great need to revisit the biblical injunctions that call for separation and distinctness and reinterpret them. For example, one of the primary texts that people use to object to interreligious prayer is Paul's advice to stay away from food offered to idols as far as possible. Even if one did, Paul wants people to be mindful of their Christian brothers and sisters. The Pauline affirmation of the oneness of God

in the same passage is quite striking (I Cor. 8). There are several issues involved in the pastoral aspect of interreligious prayer. Let me just mention one before I conclude. While interreligious prayer may seem predominantly a theological issue for some, especially Christians in the West, it is closely linked to the question of Christian identity for people who had converted from Hinduism or some other religion to Christianity. Such Christians go through great emotional trauma when they participate in interreligious worship because it seems to question their identity. Most of these Christians had defined themselves primarily in terms of the differences between Christianity and other religions. For them interreligious prayer blurs their own Christian identity.

Every corporate prayer is political. It deals with how people define, order, and manage their relationships to each other. The "politics" of interreligious prayer can at times turn prayer into an act of "compromise," and such prayers turn out to be bland, satisfying no one. The fear of syncretism belongs, I think, to this area of the politics of interreligous prayer. Quite often syncretism is a weapon used to smite at every attempt to engage in interreligious prayer.

One of the places where all the five scenarios that I described at the beginning of the presentation come alive as a pastoral issue is in an interreligious household. How they would visit each other's places of worship, use each other's resources, pray parallel at times, discover or create common prayers, and pray together. This is an area where we need to work more.

Before I conclude, let me present a copy of the letter I wrote to a friend who took objection to my offering an "interreligious" benediction at Emory University during a ceremony to welcome the new President to the University. I offer this letter because it exposes some of the pastoral difficulties involved in interreligious prayer. To name a few, what are our motives? Are we trying to be "nice" to people? Are we afraid of being prophetic? Does this really enhance my spirituality? Here it is.

The Benediction went like this:

As a new chapter opens,
A new flower blooms,
And a fresh fragrance of novelty and expectation spreads,

Let us step into the future with confidence and hope.

May our pursuit of excellence be complemented by our desire to care for each other!

May our search after truth be accompanied by our appreciation of plurality and variety!

May our works of beauty be sensitized by the ugly realities of suffering and pain!

And may our acts of goodness be tempered by a deep sense of humility and grace!

The One,
The One, who is called by many names yet meets us as the nameless one,

That One,
May that One surround us, sustain us!

Let it be so, let it be so! Amen.

Here is my response to my friend's objection to the benediction:

Thank you very much for your letter dated April 10, 1995. I am sorry that I could not respond to your helpful remarks earlier than this. I want to express my sincere gratitude to you for two specific things: first, for your kind words of appreciation for the lecture I gave to the Georgia Christian Council a couple of years ago in Savannah, and second, for the care and concern you have expressed both for the well-being of Emory University and for the enhancement of my own ministry to the academy and the church.

I have attached a copy of the text of the Benediction that I offered at the Inauguration of President Chase. When the Inauguration committee invited me to offer the benediction, which I consider as a great honor and privilege, they asked me to be specifically mindful of "the significance of the moment in terms of the interfaith commitments of Emory" and "the importance of the world beyond our continent to the life of the University." These two concerns are very dear to my heart and central to my vocation here at Emory. Therefore I accepted the invitation gladly, and spent hours pondering over ways to express these two concerns. As I thought through this, it became clear to me that I should offer the benediction neither as a "good speech" or "blessing" from a Christian theologian at a United Methodist institution nor as a word of dismissal from a minister of the Church of South India, but rather offer it *on behalf of all* the people present at the ceremony.

Once I decided to go this way, I was convinced that I should use the kind of language that would be both intelligible to, and inclusive of, all persons present. I was reminded of a passage where Paul writes, "I will pray with the spirit, but I will pray with the mind also; ...Otherwise, ...how can anyone in the position of an outsider say the 'Amen' to your thanksgiving, since the outsider does not know what you are saying?" (I Cor. 14; 15, 16). While I chose an intelligible and inclusive language, I was keen that the benediction should reflect what Emory stands for as a Methodist institution. As you would see, the kind of virtues that I pray for in that benediction, such as, caring for each other, appreciation of plurality, sensitivity to human suffering, and a deep sense of humility and grace, are very Christian and indeed Methodist. Then I

considered whether I wanted to use "God," "Christ," and "Holy Spirit," in the prayer. I opted to use "The One," to be mindful of those who do not subscribe to the Trinitarian understanding of God, while the phrase "who is called by many names yet meets us as the nameless one" is, for me, very reminiscent of the Trinitarian view of God, though not expressed in the traditional liturgical formula. I was reminded of Albert Schweitzer's words at the end of his monumental work, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*, where he refers to Christ's coming to the people of each age as unknown and as a stranger. Then I went on to consider whether I should use the word "Amen," which is very specific to the liturgical traditions of Judaism and Christianity. I just could not let go "Amen," and so I placed before the word "Amen" the meaning of Amen, namely, "Let it be so!" so that those in the audience who are not familiar with the Judeo-Christian liturgies would be able to join in saying "let it be so."

As you can see, the benediction that I offered that day was the result of significant theological thinking and careful craftsmanship. I have described, thus, in detail the process of preparing this benediction so that you will know that the set of motives that you refer to as underlying my benediction are not truly my motives. Neither the fact that "Emory derives a good deal of support in many ways from outside the Christian community," nor "the interest in not offending anyone of another religious tradition who might have been present" were my motives. My primary motive was to pray *on behalf of all* those who were present.

In addition to explaining the process of preparing this benediction, I also want to share with you the theological convictions that lay behind what I did. Let me mention only a few. I fully agree with you that Christians and Christian institutions should maintain a distinctively Christian witness in the public arena. But I do not see this particular occasion for doing that for two reasons. First, I do not think the purpose of prayer is to witness. If one makes witness as the purpose of prayer, it is difficult to avoid the sin of hypocrisy. Jesus himself has warned us against such praying in public places. (Matthew 6:5&6). Prayer is something that is addressed to God in utter humility and sincere praise. If at all any witnessing happens when we pray in public it is due to the felt presence of the grace of God in our midst as we place our desires, longings, and heartaches before God in humility and praise without any concern for witnessing to others.

Second, this particular occasion does not call for a witness at the point of prayer. The distinctively Methodist heritage of Emory was mentioned at various points in the ceremony. The remarks and the installation prayer by

Bishop Jones rightly bore the marks of a distinctively Christian and Methodist tradition. Those were truly moments of witness. But the corporate prayer on this occasion is primarily and expression of our solidarity and our total dependence on God in our togetherness, and therefore it should have an inclusive character. I have participated in many interreligious gatherings where people of various religious traditions, such as, Judaism, Hinduism, Islam and others, come together for prayer, conversation and joint action. On such occasions I have always insisted that persons of each religious tradition maintain their integrity and offer prayers which have the unique features of their own tradition. In such a setting, prayer becomes a form of witness, and it should. This particular occasion is different.

You are right when you say that "the benediction was not specifically Christian in character," only if we judge it from the standpoint of the traditional Trinitarian patterns. What makes some thing specifically Christian in character is, as far as I am concerned, a very complex and difficult question. On the one hand, the use of the name of Jesus the Christ may be seen as a way to maintain this distinctive Christian character. I come from a country where names go a long way to describe a person. For example, anyone in India who hears that my name is Thomas immediately knows that I am a Christian. So in that sense naming the name of Jesus the Christ does help one to maintain the specifically Christian character of situations, persons and events. But on the other hand, I am challenged again and again by the call of Jesus to a life of genuine piety and authentic service that go without and far beyond the naming of Jesus as the Christ. For example, his injunction in Matthew 7:21-23, which invites us to understand the naming of Christ's name in a different and more difficult way, is a passage that has always unsettled my comfortableness in naming the name. Much more importantly, there are times when I think that one has to refrain from naming the name of Christ for Christ's own sake because it is precisely in *not* naming his name that we attempt to live out a life of Christlikeness. In line with Jesus' own teachings, in losing Christ's name we gain it; in leaving out his name we mention it; and in dying we rise to new life. Perhaps in not mentioning the name of Christ we witness to the spirit of Christ.

I am one who takes the doctrine of sin quite seriously. Hence I believe that all our prayers, either in a traditional pattern or in a contemporary version, are mixed with or stained by sin. The prayer that I offered is one such "sinful" prayer and not a pure and sinless Christian prayer. That means I had to decide between two kinds of sinful prayers. I decided to err on the side of inclusivity rather than on the side of distinctiveness. I was reminded of Martin Luther's

injuction to Melanchthon: "Sin boldly." These are some of the theological ideas I have been struggling with in coming to understand what it means to be a Christian in a multi-religious setting.

As you can see, your letter has helped me to think through some of the difficult and complex issues related to our witness in the religiously pluralistic world. I have also used that benediction and some of the ideas from your response to help the students in my class on "Christian Encounter with Hinduism" to deal with the issue of whether we can pray together with people of other religions. I want to thank you again for your interest in the well-being of Emory, and especially for your continued support and encouragement to the work of the Candler School of Theology. Without the support and prayers of people like you in the leadership of the Church we will not be able to carry on the ministry that has been entrusted to us. Please continue to pray for us.

Yours in Christ,
M. Thomas Thangaraj

This, for me, is an instance of pastoral care one needs to exercise to those who find themselves in interreligious prayer.

In conclusion, let me point out one other possibility. If you examine the ways in which our theologies have emerged out of our lived situations, we can see clearly how the practice of prayer and worship has, in the past, guided and shaped our theological articulation. For example, the developement of the doctrine of Trinity owes more to the practice of prayer and worship among early Christians than to any intellectual pursuit as such. If so, we need to involve more and more in experiences of interreligious prayer and eventually our theologies of worship, religions, and pastoral care will "catch up" with our lived experience!

Theological Assessment of Interreligious Prayer

J. Russel CHANDRAN

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Introduction

The question has often been raised whether it is proper for Christians to join in prayer with people of other faiths? My childhood background was that of conservative Christianity in which there was exclusivistic rejection of not only people of other religious faiths but also other Christians. During that period it was not possible for protestant Christians to pray or worship with Roman Catholics. The reverse was also true, Roman Catholics would not pray with Protestants. In those days the Missouri Synod Lutherans would not pray with other Christians. The situation changed with the developments of the widening ecumenical relations. Praying and worshipping together has become common with most Christians. With the development of wider ecumenism including people of other religious faiths as well the appropriateness of joining in interreligious prayer has become a serious issue for which there is no easy answer.

Examples of Interreligious Prayer

There are today many examples of interreligious prayer. On several occasions such as natural calamities, national celebrations, etc. people of different faiths come together and join in interreligious worship and prayer. At the prayer meetings of Mahatma Gandhi passages were read from the sacred scriptures of different faiths. This practice is followed for various occasions of interreligious gatherings. Even though interreligious dialogue, in the initial period, did not include praying together, the recognition of the spiritual dimension of interreligious dialogue led to the practice of praying together. To begin with it was only common observance of a period of silent prayer. But for the last several years interreligious dialogue has included a period of common worship and prayer.

Now there are also a number of religious communities such as Theological Colleges or Seminaries, Ashrams and the like, which have regular

programmes of interreligious worship and prayer. The Dharmaram College Centre for the study of World Religions, in Bangalore, where members of different religious faiths come together, has developed programmes for common interreligious worship and prayer. They have, at Dharmaram College, a Fellowship of Inter-Religious Experience (FIRE). Anjali Ashram, near Mysore, is also a community where people of different religious faiths are welcome to stay. Some years ago the United Theological College, Bangalore started a programme for Christian participation in some important non-Christian religious festivals. On these occasions provision was made for interreligious prayer. At the funeral service of Mother Teresa, held in Calcutta, a few days ago there were prayers led by Hindus, Buddhists, Muslims and Parsis even though the main service was Christian.

The Dharmaram College Fellowship of Inter-Religious Experience has developed several models for interreligious worship and prayer. These consist of Hindu as well as Christian *bhajans*, readings from Hindu scriptures as well as the Bible, brief periods of silence, reflection or homily, prayers and rites symbolising self-dedication.

A Hindu prayer which is commonly used on occasions of interreligious worship and prayer is the *Gayatri Mantra* which reads:

"OM! You Earth, sky and Heaven, We meditate upon the glorious splendour of the Vivifier Divine". Another prayer which is collective reads:

"May the Lord protect us, May he nourish us, May we work together with great vigour, May we acquire brilliance of intellect through our studies. May we not hate one another, Let there be peace and peace and peace. (Om! Shanti! Shanti! Shanti!).

May all be happy, May all be healthy, May all see auspicious things, May none suffer".

The prayer to be offered at the end of the day asks for pardon for all the mistakes and wrongs we have done in thought, word or deed.

These are all prayers any one can use irrespective of the religious faith.

According to the findings of a Research Seminar on Sharing Worship organised by the NBCLC, Bangalore, in 1988, sharing worship "denotes for us Christians our participation under certain conditions... in the liturgy, even in the eucharist of other churches and ecclesial communities, and in the worship of other religions, as well as their participation in our worship, it includes the mutual participation in the multi-religious prayer-services and celebrations".[1]

[1] Jose Kuttianimattathil, *Practice and Theology of Interreligious Dialogue.* Bangalore. Kristu Jyoti Publications. 1995, p. 195-196.

Using the scriptures of other religions in worship services is an important aspect of sharing worship. It is to be noted, however, that according to the Canon 1258:1 of 1917 code of Canon Law "It is illicit for Catholics in any way to assist actively or take part in sacred worship of non-Catholics".[2] But even before the Second Vatican Council there were instances when Christians (Protestants and Catholics) and people of other religions prayed together. P. Chenchiah mentions several such instances, for example, on the occasion of a natural calamity, in the context of the struggle for independence, etc. In 1948 on the occasion of Mahatma Gandhi's death, Archbishop Leonard Raymond, the then Bishop of Allahabad, organised a prayer meeting in the Cathedral to which leaders of different religions were invited. The students of the seminary as well as sisters participated through singing at the immersion ceremony of Mahatma Gandhi's ashes in the confluence at Allahabad.

In the early period of interreligious dialogue interreligious prayer was not practised. The participants either prayed separately or prayed in silence. But in due course worshipping and praying together became a regular practice. The Consultation on the Theology of Hindu-Christian Dialogue held at Bombay in 1969 affirmed that "ultimately dialogue is an act of communion, realized in a special way in service, shared prayer and silence".[3]

Ashrams and Dialogue centres encouraged praying together as well as being together in silence. The dialogue programme encouraged the development of a more positive attitude to the cult and rites of other religions. Several participants in interreligious dialogue programmes have recognized that "Dialogue should naturally lead to common prayer or worship. Common prayer which builds up a human fellowship cutting across the barriers of religious traditions should be seen as the living expression of the faith in the presence and action of God in cultures and religions of the world".

In India praying together started gaining acceptance on a wider scale with the "live togethers" organized by the CBCI commission on Dialogue. In one of the reports of the first such Hindu-Christian live-together organized in 1973, we read the following account of praying together:

> The common prayer services conducted every day morning and evening were the most attractive and inspirational feature of this living-together. Before a lamp representing the Divine Light all sat down. A Hindu Sadhu and a Christian priest or religious every time led the prayer. Passages from the Hindu Scriptures and the Holy Bible were read out for meditation. The

[2] *Ibid.* p. 396.
[3] *Ibid.* p. 400.

Bhajans and the recitals of Vedic Hymns amidst the rising fragrance elevated the souls to heaven.[4]

In his call for the Assisi day-of-prayer Pope John Paul II observed, "The coming together of so many religious leaders to pray is in itself an invitation today to the world to become aware that there exists another dimension of peace and another way of promoting it which is not a result of negotiations, political compromises or economic bargaining. It is the result of prayer, which in the diversity of religions, expresses a relationship with a supreme power that surpasses our human capacities alone. ...This day is, therefore, a day of prayer and for what goes together with prayer; silence, pilgrimage and fasting".[5]

Participation in interreligious prayer does not imply any compromise on convictions people of different religious faiths are committed to. For us Christians the centrality of God's saving act in Jesus Christ is the key to our worship and prayer life. The sacraments of Baptism and the Eucharist express this centrality and our prayer life is closely linked to the sacraments. Similarly every other religious faith has its own unique characteristic and we respect the integrity and legitimacy of each faith.

Plurality of Religious Faiths

The context of interreligious prayer is the plurality of religious faiths in almost every region of the world. Therefore our approach to interreligious prayer is also closely linked to how we look at plurality of faiths. Even though the phenomenon of religious pluralism has become increasingly complex in the modern period it is by no means a new phenomenon. Both the Old Testament and the New Testament had the background of the presence of other religious faiths and cultures. In the Old Testament we read of the Canaanite religions, the worship of Baal, and also of the cultures of the Hittites, Philistines, Phoenecians, Babylonians and others. In the New Testament Jesus' ministry and teaching was in the context of the presence of Samaritans, Romans, Greeks, Syro-Phoenecians etc. One of the demands made when Christianity was spreading in the Graeco-Roman world was that Christianity should accept the harmony of all religions under the supremacy of the cult of Caesar. The Church refused and suffered persecution.

[4] Fr. John Peter in his article on, *Interreligious Worship and Dialogue* in Paul Puthanagady (Ed.), *Sharing Worship*. Bangalore. NBCLC. 1988, p. 735, *ibid.* p. 403-4.

[5] Quoted by Albert Nambiaparambil in his article on *Interfaith Worship of Interreligious Fellowship*, in Paul Puthanangady, *Sharing Worship*. Bangalore, NBCLC. 1988, p. 599.

Guidelines from the Bible

In the Bible we have both exclusivist and inclusivist approaches to people of other faiths. There are passages reflecting the faith that Israel's God was only for Israel and that he wanted the people to hate and destroy other religions. In the story of Israel's settlement in the promised land, the people were asked to destroy the places of worship of the Canaanite religions. While preparing to enter Canaan the Israelites were told through Moses, "You must drive out all its inhabitants as you advance, destroy all their stone carved figures and their images of cast metal, and lay their shrines in ruins" (Num. 33:52). According to Deuteronomy the statutes and laws given to the People of Israel required them "to demolish completely all the sanctuaries where the nations whom you are dispossessing worship their gods... Pull down their altars, break their sacred pillars, burn their sacred poles and hack down the idols of their gods, and blot out the name of them from the place" (Deut. 12:2-7). Even though Israel assimilated and accommodated many elements from the cultures and religions that surrounded her into her own religion, the "worship of alien deities in its many forms" is uncompromisingly forbidden (Is. 40:18-20; 44:9-20; Jer. 10:1-9; Wis. 13:10-14:31).[6] The Books of Ezra and Nehemiah also tell us about the authoritarian manner in which the people who returned from exile were asked to give up their foreign wives (Ezra 10:10-11; Nehemiah 13:23-30).

Over against such exclusivist trends we have also strong affirmations of openness to other faiths and cultures. Moses the deliverer grew up in Pharoah's home and married the daughter of Jethro the Medianite priest. Later he married a Cushite woman. When Aaron and Miriam, his brother and sister, criticised him for this God vindicated Moses saying, "Of all my household he alone is faithful". Miriam is punished with leprosy (Num. 12:1-15). There are passages implying that the worship in other religions is not worthless. Worship offered to the Lord by people who are not Jews is also acceptable to the Lord (Mal. 1:11; Dan. 4:34-37; 6:25-27; Is. 19:16-25). Those who are not Jews are only required to recognize Yahweh as the true Lord and not obliged to convert, but continue to remain within their own cultural and religious traditions. eg. Jethro, Nebuchad-nezzar, the people of Nineveh in the story of Jonah. The story of Naaman the Syrian (2Kings 5:17-19) also suggests tolerance towards other religious traditions.

The Book of Jonah is a bold affirmation of God's concern for all peoples. All are God's people, not just Israel. This is the insight of Amos when he said that it was not only Israel who were liberated from Egypt, God had brought

[6] Jose Kuttanimattathil, *op. cit.* p. 405.

the Philistines from Caphtor and the Aramaeans from Kir. The Israelites are just like the Cushites to God (Amos 9:7). The teaching of the great prophets of the Old Testament was to lead people away from a tribalistic approach to a universalist and inclusive outlook.

In the New Testament Jesus was confronted by exclusivist traditions of Pharisees and Sadducees. In that context Jesus' teaching and example challenged the narrow exclusivist approach. Even though the main concern of Jesus was not response to religious pluralism he did draw attention to the greatness of faith in others whenever there was an opportunity. He praised the faith of the Roman centurion (Matt. 8:10; Luke 7:9) and the Syrophoenecian woman (Matt. 15:21-28; Mark 7:24-30). Jesus' words, "Many will come from East and West to sit with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob at the banquet in the Kingdom of Heaven" (Matt. 8:11) challenge us to adopt an inclusive vision of the people of God. Kenneth Cracknell rightly adds "Yet without becoming Christians like us".[7] This is certainly an acknowledgement of people acceptable to God in all religious faiths. The criteria for God's acceptance is not commitment to a particular creed or religious faith but the quality of one's faith. On more than one occasion Jesus suggested that his own people, the Jews, could learn from the Samaritans (Luke 10:37; 17:11-19). Jesus' approach was that rather than making exclusive claims for one's own faith we should be appreciative of what is good in other people's faith.

It is good to note that the prayer which our Lord taught us is not just a Christian Prayer, it is a universal prayer which can be used by any one, irrespective of his/her religious affiliation. It is a most appropriate interreligious prayer. This was acknowledged by the Governor of Karnataka, Kurshid Alam Khan, when he came for a YWCA programme in Bangalore in 1996. I may also add that I have not come across any prayer from other religious faiths as meaningful and comprehensive as the Lord's Prayer.

The final vision with which the Bible closes in the Book of Revelation is that of the New Jerusalem, the heavenly city, which has no temple, whose gates are always kept open and into which the splendour and wealth of the nations will be brought. This is the image of an inclusive community, gathered round God and the Lamb of God, open to receive whatever is true, beautiful and good from the cultures of all the nations. The only restriction mentioned is that nothing unclean will be permitted to enter (Rev. 21:22-27).

This does raise the question of what is unclean. Who determines what is unclean or evil? Is it proper to say that all that is in other faiths is unclean or

[7] Kenneth Cracknell, *Towards a New Relationship – Christians and People of Other Faiths*. London. Epworth Press. 1986, p. 54.

evil? Jesus, certainly, rejected such a view. For those who follow Jesus Christ it is Jesus Who determines what is unclean or evil. We are called to reject whatever is incompatible with Christ. People of other faiths will have their own criteria for determining what is evil and unclean. Through dialogue among people of different faiths it should be possible to arrive at some consensus about what is to be rejected as evil and unclean. Our commitment to Christ will also challenge us to discern as evil und unclean the practice of some forms of idolatry, the caste system in Hinduism, the commercialization of religious festivals and all unjust and opppresive practices.

Traditional Missionary Approach

The traditional Christian response to the multifaith context has been the missionary approach according to which the objective of the missionary and evangelistic outreach of the Church was to lead people to renounce their respective religious affiliations and to become Christians. It was assumed that Christianity which had taken shape in the west was normative. As a result the conversion effected was not to become Christians but Catholics, Orthodox, Anglicans, Methodists, Lutherans, Baptists etc. The image of Christ which such missionary enterprise projected was that of the Imperial Christ rather than that of the Servant Christ of the Gospels.

Constantine's decision to give the Church the status of official religion of the empire distorted the image of the Church. As pointed out by David Bosch, "Emperor Theodosius' decrees of 380 (which demanded that all citizens of the Roman Empire be Christians) and 391 (which proscribed all non-Christian cults) inexorably paved the way for Pope Boniface's bull which proclaimed that the Catholic Church was the only institution guaranteeing salvation".[8] It led to an unholy alliance between Church and State. Before the Constantinian decision the Christians were the persecuted people. After Theodosius' decree Christians were the favoured ones and the non-Christians were the persecuted people.

It is good to recall that the spread of Christianity through the Roman Catholic as well as the Protestant Missions, whatever be the merits, was also often characterised by ignorance of other faiths. For many churches, the affirmation of faith and its formulation are totally unrelated to the religious faiths and experiences of people living in their midst. Their attitude to other

[8] David Bosch, *Transforming Mission – Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*. Maryknoll, New York. Orbis Books. 1991, p. 474.

religious faiths was also ill-informed and based on a simplistic assumption of the finality, absoluteness and uniqueness of the faith they hold. Interreligious prayer presupposes an attitude of respect for one another's faith and desire and willingness to learn from and be corrected by the knowledge of other faiths.

The basic unity of the whole human race within which are to be seen the religious differences give us sufficient grounds for coming together to adore the one God who is the origin and goal of all. "Since in a very real and fundamental manner we are one with the whole of humanity, it is not only our right but our duty to worship him together with others". The *Guidelines for Inter-religious Dialogue* issued by the CBCI quotes from Mahatma Gandhi: "Congregational prayer is a means for establishing the essential unity through common worship. Prayer is the greatest binding force, making for the solidarity and oneness of the human family. If a person realises his unity with God through prayer, he will look upon everybody as himself. There will be no high, no low, no narrow provincialisms or petty rivalries..."[9].

Guidelines for response

First, some of the affirmations we make about divine revelation in Christ, salvation, grace of God, etc. need to be critically reviewed. We cannot assume that we know everything and that we do not need the help of others. We need to be humble enough to recognize that we can learn from the faith and life of others. According to the Fourth Gospel it is the Holy Spirit, promised by Jesus Christ, who leads us into all truth. The Word of God is the words of the living God who speaks to us through the Holy Spirit and is not to be identified with the written word of the Bible. The written word is the testimony to what the living God had spoken to different people at different contexts, and provide guidelines for listening to the voice of the living God in our time. The written word is not meant to be absolutised as the Word of God for all times and for all people in all places. Jesus' promise of the Holy Spirit and also his words to the disciples that they would do greater things than he had done certainly imply that he did not want himself, in his finite historic manifestation, to be absolutised for all time and for all places. If we are to be led by the Holy Spirit into all truth we cannot predetermine what and how we shall be taught. He can teach us also through other religious faiths.

[9] *Ibid.* p. 410.

Secondly, in the same way as we have our Christian Sacraments, other symbols and celebrations of festivals, the other faiths also have their sacraments, symbols and celebrations. Whether through those sacraments, symbols and festivals they make the same affirmation of truth or seek the same kind of experience can be known only through learning about them from the adherents of those faiths as well as through a scientific study of those faiths. It is also possible that through their symbols, festivals and the like, the other faiths express aspects or dimensions of truth which may enrich our apprehension of truth. The same thing may be said about the credal affirmations about God, the Incarnation, salvation, the Church, and the Christian hope.

Thirdly, Christian congregations as well as their members have to be made aware of the implications of the dialogue approach which has emerged in the ecumenical movement and should be helped to learn to live in meaningful dialogue with their neighbours who profess other faiths. We are called to abandon the confrontation or encounter approach and to adopt the dialogue approach. One of the unfortunate things is that other faiths such as Hinduism, Islam, Sikhism, also have strengthened their fundamentalist, fanatical and exclusivist confrontational approach.

Fourthly, churches need to develop a new way of looking at the multi-faith context, not as a problem for the Churchs' mission but as part of the richness of the God-given reality. Plurality of religious beliefs and practices should be accepted as something beautiful. Variety and diversity is inherent in creation. It is an expression of the greatness of the mystery of God's manifestation of himself through his creation. Both the fauna and the flora, both the animate and the inanimate forms of creation reflect a rich and unimaginable diversity. This remarkable diversity is beautiful. Is it right to think that the God who created this world with such beautiful diversity requires a particular form of religious response from all humans? In religious faith also there is a combination of God's self revelation and human wisdom. Is it not possible to accept the diversity of religious faiths as contributing to the beauty and richness of the complex spirituality of the human race, and to the greatness of national as well as global cultures? Accepting the legitimacy of different religious faiths is crucial for the quality of our corporate existence. It is a precondition for peace and communal harmony among people of different faiths.

This, however, does not mean that we just practice communal harmony for maintaining a static status quo, which may include structures of injustice and corruption. In so far as every religion is a combination of God's action as well as human wisdom there is the possibility of error and distortion of

truth. Therefore, interaction among the different faiths through dialogue towards mutual learning, correction and enrichment is important for progress towards the fulfilment of our common humanity. It is important that churches bear in mind their calling to be open to learn from other faiths even while they seek the renewal of other religions through the missionary and evangelistic outreach.

Fifthly, in order to accept the Gospel one does not have to abandon everything in the old faith. Whatever is good, beautiful and true in the old faith should not be renounced. The issue before the Jerusalem Council reported in Acts 15 was about the relation between the Gospel of Jesus Christ and the Jewish faith. The decision was that one did not have to become a Jew in order to become a Christian. The new converts were told that there was no intention to lay any great burden upon them. They were only asked to abstain from "meat that has been offered to idols from blood, from anything that has been strangled, and from fornication" (Acts 15:29). It is interesting that nothing is mentioned about their abandoning completely all their religious beliefs and practices. Only that which was discerned as evil or culturally objectionable needed to be given up. In India some of the great converts such as Brahma Bandhav Upadhyaya and Manilal Parekh wanted to call themselves Hindu Christians. They held that they continued to be Hindus even while accepting discipleship of Christ. They only had to abandon whatever was contrary to the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Those who come together for interreligious prayer recognize God's saving presence in each religious community, irrespective of the different symbols expressing it and the different interpretations. The meaningfulness of interreligious prayer depends on the recognition of the reality of the presence and the experience of God among all the participants even though they are adherents of different religious faiths. The unity and oneness in Christ for which we are called is unity in diversity and not unity in uniformity.

It is from this perspective that we need to reformulate our ecclesiology and the theological basis for interreligious prayer. What is the Church to which we are called to belong through our baptism and incorporation into the Body of Christ? We are challenged to re-read the Bible and understand afresh the meaning of the sacrament of Baptism as a sacrament of commitment to belong to the "one new humanity". It is a sacrament of unity and not separation. The separation that baptism demands is from the sin of separatism. As Fr. John Peter has affirmed, "Our faith in one God, and acknowledging his all-embracing plan of salvation moves us to dialogue with other religions and culminate in a common prayer too. The specifically love dimension of Christianity... requires us to express our love with people

of other religions and foster the love of God in all of them and promote unity and solidarity among them. In a multi-religious context, a common prayer meeting is a necessary expression of the human pilgrimage from isolation to communion... Prayer meetings of interreligious nature are not merely means to Kingdom, but are the very expression of the new Society, i.e. celebrating the existing unity among the religions, thereby anticipating the Kingdom already now".[10]

[10] Fr. John Peter, *op. cit.* pp. 739-740.

Testimonies

Interreligious Movement in Rio de Janeiro

Lusmarina CAMPOS GARCIA

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Interfaith dialogue, interfaith prayer or interfaith worship all suggest movement. It seems therefore appropriate that we in Rio de Janeiro have called the interreligious experience the Interreligious Movement.

The Interreligious Movement and the Ecological Concern.

Non governmental organisations (NGO) of the world developed a parallel event – Global Forum – to the official United Nations' Conference, *The Environment and Development Conference*, held in Rio in 1992. The Brazilian NGO, The Institute for Religious Studies (ISER), was responsible for organising the World Religions' Vigil: A New Day for the Earth. Organising the vigil took about four months. Weekly meetings discussed the shape of the Vigil, opening space to ask questions and finding ways to respond to various theological anxieties, trying to work with the historical divisions of how to put together people, who once were historically divided and whose identity-affirmation seemed to carry an attitude of exclusivity, deciding which religious tradition would occupy which tent, who would speak and who would sing and in what order.

The Vigil contained three different movements: the opening and the closing, two common movements when all religious traditions would be celebrating together, and the "tent time", when each tradition would be celebrated in its own tent.

The opening was the night of June 4 in Aterro do Flamengo, the city of Rio. There were about 10,000 people from 25 different religious groups and traditions: Jews, Roman Catholics, Orthodox Christians, Protestants, Muslims, Japanese Buddhists, Tibetan Buddhists, Zen Buddhists, Hindus, Brahma Kumaris, Guinana Mandiran, Ananda Marga, Sai Baba, Baha'i, Candomblé, Umbanda, Spiritists, Santo Daime, Messianics, and the Great White Fraternity. The Aterro do Flamengo Beach was transformed into a real Sacred Village. People sat in a semi-circle. The Executive Secretary of ISER, Rubem Cesar Fernandes, and one of the founders of the Interreligious Movement in Rio, greeted the people.

An Australian indigenous participant began playing a digeridoo. There was

no light, only the flame of the candle each participant held in the hand. People stayed like this for about 20 minutes, listening by candlelight to the sound of the digeridoo. The digeridoo has a primary sound; it is a sound on which the body sits; it is continuous, long and without much variation. It is as if it was the escape hatch for the sound of the internal movement of the earth and of the water, which connects the body to these movements. For the first time I felt that my body didn't end with my skin; it extended out to the universe. And this relationship with the whole universe united my body with everyone present. There was no need to ask about differences, historical divisions, theological disagreements, names of God...

Each tradition had about 10 minutes to express itself in its particular and traditional way: speaking, praying, singing, dancing, giving a message, blessing. The participants responded respectfully accompanying the expression of each tradition. It was a powerful signal of openness to the inevitable emerging reality of friendship between people of different religious traditions, which would continue beyond the event itself.

The tent time – During the whole night followers of each tradition gathered in their respective tents and celebrated the significance of the event. In each tent there was music of different styles and rhythms; diverse instruments such as guitars, accordions, drums, violins, electronic pianos, harps, shells; there were altars of different shapes, colours, symbols, sometimes full of objects, sometimes almost empty, sometimes in the centre on the ground, sometimes on a table in the back; there were rituals danced in a circle or spoken standing or prayed silently, seated; there were many colours such as the white of the Candomblé Saints' Mothers, the orange of the Buddhist monks, the black of the Lutheran pastors, the salmon-beige of the Hare Krishnas, the purple and white of the Great White Fraternity, the multicoloured stoles of the Catholic priests and the Methodist ministers, and the blue of the Taoist monks.

There was a history in each tent, a tradition, a way of experiencing the Sacred, a way of being and living sacramentally in this world: a spirituality.

Although each tradition had its own tent, all the tents were open to everyone who wanted to come, to see, to observe and even to take part in the rituals.

The daybreak – In the closing of the Vigil, there was a second common moment. All were together and again each tradition had time to conduct prayers, songs, speeches, messages, blessings in their traditional way in the few minutes reserved for each and every one. There was great expectation in the air: the arrival of His Holiness, the Dalai Lama. He spoke simple and straightforward words: "...to successfully face the grave problems of our world

today, there are two necessary attitudes: peace of the spirit, interior peace or serenity and determination. I mean fidelity to the goals to which we purpose ourselves. Both attitudes demand, therefore, one requirement: compassion ... It is possible to live without religion, but it is not possible to live without affection. To practice compassion it to develop basic human values, such as the affection of one human being for another".

The President of the Brazilian Bishops' National Conference, Don Luciano Mendes de Almeida, called people to struggle for the dignity of life, which is so often threatened, particularly in the case of the landless, the homeless, the unemployed, the factory workers, the street children, the indigenous, the black and women. The struggle to defend our common earth has to do with the struggle for human dignity.

The World Religions' Vigil showed that it is possible for differences to live together within a climate of cordiality, respect, mutual acceptance and learning. And although "each tent" signified the limitation of identity, it also communicated the richness of diversity.

This was the first big interreligious event in Brazil and it did not have as its starting-point the religions in themselves, but the common cause of the planet's preservation. It was not assembled for any church or any religious tradition, but for non-governmental organisations. It did not have its origin in the clergy, among priests, pastor and monks, but in the laity. I think that this accounts for the vitality and the fragility of the Interreligious Movement in Rio. Its vitality is based on the fact that people of different religions have a "neutral field", where they can talk and celebrate together; there is less suspicion and resistance and the whole perspective is one of inclusion, something which is a great step forward for those who have theologies guided by a logic of exclusion.

There is however also a fragility. Since it isn't born in the ecclesiastic context, some of those responsible within the religious traditions don't consider themselves responsible for the continuity and therefore do not wish to develop a theoretical and theological basis as its stable foundation.

The Interreligious Movement and the Citizenship Concern is about the experience of celebrating and acting together out of a specific situation and is related to the social-economic-humanitarian problems in Brazilian society.

The Citizen Action against Hunger and Misery in Favour of Life.

The Citizenship Action was a big national campaign launched in Brazil in 1993 in the framework of civil society and the federal government. In February 1993 the "parallel government" of the Workers' Party proposed to the then President of Brazil, Itamar Franco, that he make it a priority of his government

to eradicate hunger in Brazil through a Hunger and Misery Combat Plan, considering the 32 milion Brazilian citizens living in the most abject misery. 900 NGOs formed the Movement for ethics in politics. They agreed that misery and democracy were incompatible and they decided to create The Citizen Action against Hunger and Misery in Favour of Life and called upon Brazilian society to work together to further this action. A vigil against misery took place on Leme Beach. The worship had its focus in prayer and was held together in an order which comprised an affirmation of prayer for life and the commitment as people of faith to struggle against all forms of degradation of human dignity. The prayers came from various religious traditions and were in the form of sacred texts, songs and litanies. Popular Brazilian songs appropriate for the occasion interspersed the prayers. The co-ordinator of the campaign, Herbert de Souza, known as Betinho in Brazil, said that it is now time to stop the genocide process which generates the absolute misery that brings millions of people to the unbearable limits of hunger and despair ... the eradication of misery is the ethical outcry of the present time to which other things must be subordinated 'it is not possible to eat at rest in the middle of generalised hunger, it is not possible to be happy' but more than to be aware, it is necessary to have faith.

Silent prayer followed, people shared the light of their candles and committed themselves to action in life. Sharing the peace in the way of each tradition, people embraced one another, bowed, shook hands, touched shoulders. It was a strong moment.

Also the Rio de Janeiro Artist Association began their support of the Action against Hunger and Misery with an interreligious worship. In this worship the invocation was in the name of the Giver of Life, for whom we have so many names and whose manifestation has many different forms. Following the adoration, which was done by each tradition in their own way, the sermon spoke about life, dignity and commitment to the values of life and ethics of love. The prayers were said in the ways of the different religions, calling by name the divinities and those present responded after each prayer: "Oh You, of such different names, give us life." A big circle, where people held hands led towards the end of this worship service and people were dismissed with the words:

Let's go now in peace,
Let's live as free people,
Let's build a free world,
Let's build a humanity free, nurtured and creative,
who may be hungry not for food,

but for music, poetry, dance, expression,
for love, joy, happiness and a life of plenty.

In April 1996 in Pará, Northern Brazil, about 200 families, organised by the Landless Movement, marched claiming that the Macaxera should be given to them. This farm is a large estate of unproductive land, which is used for speculation. The government gave the order to "clean the road". 19 were killed and about 40 wounded. The Interreligious Movement in Rio organised a worship to protest against this violence and to pray for the people.

Following the death of about 100 elderly person in one old people's home in Rio in 1996, the Interreligious Movement in Rio went to the home to learn about the treatment given to the elderly and to ensure that they be cared for. A public worship was held in conjunction with thi action.

The Interreligious Movement in Rio is a space of friendship between people of different religions in Rio and Brazil. The movement is not a place for theological discussions but a place for living together and for joining in service to the Brazil society.

Daily life is the key to understanding this experience of interreligious relationship. It takes place in the midst of gathering money and food for the poor and the evaluation of projects. It is in this context that I can see the Hare Krishna follower working with me and recognise that I am able to build a world, where differences are not synonymous with division, but of healthy diversity. It is here that I realise that I always want to pray together without the intention or fear of colonising or being colonised by the faith or theology of the other. Our praying together is expressing the whole body of Brazil. Christian theology made by women in Brazil has contributed to this realisation. The body is the place where daily life happens and it is the daily life itself, which is the place where our theology is born. In the experience of daily life the Interreligious Movement in Rio can also go to the street to help people and to the beach to pray, listening to the sound of the sea.

Could the Practice of Interreligious Prayer Continue? How?

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1 – Introduction

Whilst the above question may signify some despair, I hope to be saying in this paper that as long as we, as members of different faiths, remember and respect our common humanity, there is no way in which this practice can be discontinued.

Meeting here in Bangalore to discuss the problems and prospects involved in interreligious prayer provides us with a valuable opportunity not only to assess our different ventures in this regard, but also to share our experiences and to encourage each other on the road ahead. Whilst my conclusions may be premature, it is my guess that we will go away from here having heard stories from contexts which differ, in some cases even vastly so, from our own. And yet, these stories will have much in common. In essence they will not tell of dramatic achievements involving huge numbers of people. On the contrary, our stories will have reflected ups and downs, problems and progress. However, I guess that the final impression which we will all take from here is that the journey of praying and working with our friends of other faiths, is one which is worth continuing since on this journey they have touched us and we have grown!

I assume that at this stage of our consultation we would have dealt with the theological implications of interreligious prayer, the question whether it is interreligious prayer or multireligious prayer which we are talking about as well as whether we are talking about interreligious worship or interreligious prayer or both. In this paper I would like to look at some of the social implications of interreligious prayer since the form of interreligious prayer which I am really most familiar with is interreligious prayer in the form of public or national prayer.

2 – Religious plurality and religious pluralism

A situation of religious pluralism is not only necessary for the functioning of interreligious prayer but in many ways shares its difficulties and challenges.

Let us therefore first gain clarity on the meaning of religious pluralism and whether or not it is identical to religious plurality. The concepts *religious plurality* and *religious pluralism* are often used as synonyms. Whilst there is certainly nothing wrong in using them interchangeably in common speech, there is a qualitative difference which we, in this kind of conversation, are most probably only too aware of. All of us present here are coming from situations of religious plurality. Some of the societies which we represent here have been pluralistic from time immemorial whilst to others the experience of religion in the plural is confined to this century, if not to this latter half of it. The fact that there are people of different faiths present in a given society does, however, not reveal the extent to which such faith communities have all been accepted and integrated into that society. *Religious plurality tells us something about realities, but nothing about relationships.* In this sense we could regard religious plurality as minimal religious pluralism. Religious pluralism on the other hand tells about human relationships, about acceptance and discovery.

One can ask the question whether it is really necessary to distinguish between these two concepts. In countries with a long established tradition of relationships between people of different faiths, this may certainly not be an issue. In a country such as South Africa it is however very necessary.

For as long as it has been inhabited by people, the southern tip of the African continent has known religious plurality. This is however by no means the case with religious pluralism. Having been in the grip of colonialists and neo-colonialists for more than three centuries, the society might have always been aware of the presence of faiths other than Christianity. One could say that Christians by and large grudgingly tolerated the existence and proximate presence of other religions.

To have wished for normal and meaningful relationships would have been to overlook the extent to which people have been segregated, isolated and oppressed. The majority of people of other faiths were after all black and found themselves at the receiving end of Apartheid. One could therefore truthfully state that until recently it was possible for the average white person to go through life without once having a meaningful, i.e. person to person, encounter with somebody from another faith. It is only really since 1990, when residential areas and schools became accessible to all people, that normal relationships could begin to develop across religious boundaries. With the normalisation of society being a very long and tedious process, the development of religious pluralism still has a long way to go.

With the above look into my own situation, I have been trying to say that religious pluralism is not identical to religious plurality and that, unlike the latter, the existence of religious pluralism is not a given fact of any society. It

has to be nurtured like a young plant because it can, unlike religious plurality, actually be damaged or even be destroyed. For this young plant to grow, a lot of real life situations have to be experienced together, conversations have to be entered into and joint projects and activities have to be identified and initiated not only by individuals but hopefully also by religious bodies.

3 – Interreligious prayer and religious pluralism

Where should interreligious prayer be ideally placed in the process of dialogue between people of different faiths? It has been said that it is a wonderful way in which to start a process of dialogue. Another opinion is that interreligious prayer represents a fairly advanced stage in interfaith relations. Be it as it may, interreligious prayer constitutes an extremely important recognition of religious pluralism. It testifies to the fact that relationships of trust have begun to develop. It represents a creative response to newly established relationships. It upholds the integrity of the other.

For interreligious prayer to be both authentic and effective it has to meet the following conditions in relating to a situation of religious pluralism:

a. To be fully and truly plural in nature, interreligious prayer must flow *from* a context and commitment of religious pluralism. By this I mean that interreligious prayer finds its source of energy in the rich soil of an atmosphere conducive to religious pluralism and from the unshakable conviction of the participants to foster such pluralism.

b. To be fully and truly plural in nature, interreligious prayer must flow *in* a milieu of religious pluralism. Unless it is throughly soaked with religious pluralism, it will be difficult for the goals and objectives of interreligious prayer to be realized. If interreligious prayer is somehow removed from religious pluralism, by way or tokenism of whatever, it may not adequately serve the interfaith cause.

c. To be fully and truly plural in nature, interreligious prayer must flow *for* outcomes of religious pluralism. Religious pluralism, as we have noted above, does not just happen, nor does it occur automatically. Interreligious prayer, especially as a public event, must be consciously and deliberately structured so that outcomes for religious pluralism may be directly facilitated.

Kindly allow me to illustrate the relationship between religious pluralism and interreligious prayer with an example from my own situation. A major event on the way to democracy took place in 1991 when the National Peace Initiatives were launched. Aimed at bringing an end to political violence in the

country, these initiatives ushered in a totally new paradigm in our political history. For the very first time the Nationalist Government was pressurised into, and accepted, a position where it was no longer both referee and player. This could take place because a group of twelve, six business leaders and six religious leaders, fulfilled the role of facilitators. Of importance to the present discussion was the fact that the National Peace Convention, which was the culmination of the peace initiatives, was opened in prayer by representatives from four religious traditions. This was the very first time that this happened at an official, state-sponsored event and the ethos which the interfaith movement has created in South Africa must certainly receive a great deal of credit.

This arrangement was fairly well accepted with little or no criticism. However, when the same model was repeated a few months later at CODESA (Convention for a Democratic South Africa) I and II, there was a huge outcry from the Christian side and suddenly the matter of interreligious prayer was the subject of public debate. The biggest objections came from the same quarters from where Islam, in 1986, was declared a false religion and from where a campaign was launched against the appearance of the Halal sign on foodstuffs. That these sentiments were largely driven by feelings of political insecurity and uncertainty was evident and had to be viewed with sympathy. It is significant that after the ANC won the general election in 1994 and the nation was faced with a *fait accompli*, the intensity of this kind of public outcry largely subsided. At the inauguration of President Mandela, and very much with his consent, prayers were led by Chief Rabbi Harris, Mr. Lakhani from the South African Hindu Maha Sabha, Shaykh Mohammed from the Muslim Judicial Council and Archbishop Desmond Tutu. The day before, when all the members of the newly elected National Assembly were sworn, the Speaker, a Zoroastrian, requested a Muslim leader to close the proceedings in prayer. The latter did so, making use of a large part of the prayer of St. Francis of Assisi! At present the proceedings of Parliament are daily opened by a few moments of silent prayer. Calling it a cop-out, Archbishop Tutu has strongly criticised this practice in a public speech.

4 – Interreligious prayer and social action

When the interfaith movement in South Africa came into being in 1984, we as the founder members told each other that we should not follow an agenda which was different from that of the people. At the time the people's agenda was one of political liberation and the restoration of human dignity. Three years later our sensitivities in this regard were confirmed when, in

meeting with the ANC leadership in exile in Lusaka, Zambia, we were told: "We are building a house but you as people of religion should not expect of us to keep a room for you. Join us in building that house." If that was true for interfaith dialogue then, it is still true today also for interreligious prayer.

If the agenda of the people is to be the agenda for our interreligious prayers it certainly implies that we should be where the people are. It means that the plight of the people should be ours. It means that, in times of joy and celebration, we should be there to share in those moments. In times of national trauma and disaster we should not be absent. In times when conflict, yes especially interreligious conflict, threatens to disrupt societal harmony, we as people of religion should be seen praying together for that harmony to be restored.

When we, as people of religion, expect society and the government of the day to be kind to religion, we should certainly from our side feel obliged to be kind to society in turn. The absence of peace and harmony in the area of religion can have serious effects on society. However, if we utilise the most powerful tool given to us, namely that of prayer, and if we use it together, we will not only send out signals of hope to our nation but will also become its conscience. Whilst it is true that many situations of conflict between religions have political origins and agendas, a tradition of interreligious prayer will serve as a very important prophetic witness for peace and understanding.

5 – Interreligious prayer and the fear of syncretism

Although syncretism may not be seen as belonging to the social sphere, the fear of syncretism certainly does. Ever since the Nairobi Assembly of the World Council of Churches in 1975 the fear of syncretism has been hanging like a shadow over virtually any attempt of contact with people of other faiths. That this is, and will continue to be, the case with interreligious prayer is clear. In this regard I would merely likely to touch on two aspects.

In the first place the motive behind this fear needs to be examined. We were always given to understand that what is at stake in our dealings with people of other faiths is the real possibility that we may lose our identity as Christians. Dynamics at work in society and culture have however been telling us that the way in which identities are created and preserved, ensures that identities are not lost through contact with those who are different from ourselves. One therefore begins to wonder if this fear of syncretism really has to do with identity or whether it is perhaps mentality that comes into the picture. As Christians we should begin to seriously ask ourselves whether it is

really the possible loss of identity that is at stake or whether it is rather the perpetuation of a certain mentality that lies at the root of the matter. In the area of prayer this mentality can be characterised by a refusal to accept the integrity of the other. Perhaps we should have a fresh look at those quarters in the Church from where the strongest outcry comes against the so-called dangers of syncretism. We may in the process make interesting discoveries about power and dominance in society.

A second thought in this regard is whether we should not come to terms with sycretism as a positive and enriching phenomenon in our present day world. While this is not the time nor the place for a detailed study of syncretism, we need, in the area of prayer and then in particular interreligious prayer, to come to terms with the reality of syncretism in the lives of, for instance, African Christians. For quite some time now there is a resurgence of traditional beliefs taking place on the continent to which I belong. This movement has also reached South Africa. Whilst many reasons could be thought of to explain this development, the link with political liberation is most probably of great importance. Whilst traditional beliefs were condemned as pagan by Christian missionaries, they have now, with the restoration of human dignity, gained a new respectability and can be openly talked about. One manifestation of this resurgence is the important role which the ancestors are playing in the prayers of African Christians. If interreligious prayer is to be discarded because of the fear of syncretism, we are in danger of alienating our fellow African Christians in whose prayers a blending of traditions has already taken place.

There is a last matter which I would like to touch upon in considering interreligious prayer, and for lack of a more suitable place I would like to mention it here: dealing with the importance of religion and religious freedom in society and in considering the importance of interreligious dialogue and interreligious prayer, the rights and position of those who prefer not to believe and not to pray should be considered. In South Africa we are just coming from an era which I would call the "Tyranny of Religion". Christianity has enjoyed the protection of the State for many centuries and in many ways the State took religious responsibilities upon itself. Thus, for example, the State, on request of especially the Dutch Reformed Church, made and maintained laws and regulations regarding the observance of Sunday as a day of rest. Here I would rather not speak of the stringent laws which the State, also on request of the Church, applied to the matter of racially mixed marriages. With the dawning of a democratic era in our country, this hegemony has not only come to an end, but people who do not believe have also shown the courage to say so openly. In preparing for the National Peace Convention in 1991, I, as one of the twelve

facilitators, was part of a sub-committee that had to deal with the practical details of the Convention. When the final format of the Peace Accord was considered, I had to present a request from the side of the religious leaders that the preamble of the Accord should refer to the fact that we, as human beings, have been created in the image of God. Immediately the delegates from the trade unions objected, saying "we do not buy that!" It seems to me that, in our involvement in society, we should not lose sight of those who cannot pray with us but who can work with us.

6 – Conclusion

One of the responses to the inquiry on interreligious worship and prayer asked the question: "Are we really worshipping together or are we merely seeking social harmony?" I would prefer to delete the word "merely". When societal harmony between religions in Nigeria, Northern Ireland, India, etc. is being threatened, and when forty black churches are being burned down in the USA, it is clear that interreligious, and intrareligious, prayer should be continued with. Our common humanity simply demands it.

My Experience of Interreligious Prayer

Ronnie PRABHU

Editor's Note: *Ronnie Prabhu is a Jesuit priest and leads a multi-religious group, "Ashirvad" in Bangalore, India.*

I shall be sharing with you my experience of interreligious prayer, that is, my experience of praying with people who do not share my Christian faith.

Prayer is a very personal and at the same time a communitarian exercise. Interreligious prayer is communitarian, but even before looking into its communitarian forms, I must say that even my personal prayer in an analogous sense is interreligious, because exposed as I have been to the rich spiritual traditions of Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam prayers from these traditions have spontaneously become part of my own prayer. Thus in moments when I feel helpless, uncertain as what to do, the prayer of Arjuna in the *Bhagavad Geetha* comes to my mind, "I just don't know what I am to do; teach me, as I take refuge in you"; or I make my own the lovely offering of Meera Bai, "I am thirsting for your love, my Beloved! I shall make this body a lamp and my tender heart shall be its wick; I shall fill it with the scented oil of my young love and burn it night and day at your shrine, O Beloved".

Saints and mystics in every religious tradition have given expression in their prayer to the deepest spiritual stirrings of the human heart – and these can easily form part of anyone else's prayer.

Coming now to praying with others: I have occasions of praying with others individually and collectively. People of different faiths come to me as a priest, for counselling and guidance, and pour out their hearts to me. Meeting an individual at the depths of his/her heart is an occasion that spontaneously lends itself to prayer and I pray with him/her. Sometimes I say a prayer and sometimes the other too expresses a prayer: such prayer is just the outpouring of the human heart and transcends all religious differences. By and large I find that among those with whom I pray, those who are not Christians generally don't have the tradition of making a spontaneous prayer aloud. I also find that in such prayer at that depth with an individual, my own faith tends to find expression and I pray and bless the individual in the name of Jesus, and I invoke the intercession of the saints and of the Blessed Virgin.

I have frequent occasions when I pray with others collectively. Some of these occasions are formal public functions, like when we meet to mourn the death of a dignitary. On such occasions it is customary for representatives of

different religious groups to take their turn to pray, each in his own way according to his own tradition, while the rest respectfully stand by. There is a richness about this kind of interreligious prayer because it brings out the variety that belongs to each religious culture, its language and traditions. But there is also a disadvantage in that such prayer really turns out to be a juxtaposition of a series of sectarian prayers; it ceases to be community prayer in which all can take part. We must note here, however, that by and large Hindus do not have "theological" difficulties in participating in the prayer of other religions; Muslims and Christians, however, do have theological difficulties.

In recent times we find an increasing number of *Sarva Dharma Sammelanas* (public get-togethers of different religions) as part of a larger celebration: say a town festival or even a temple celebration. At these *Sarva Dharma Sammelanas* we have prayer offered in the tradition of different religions, and the purpose is to promote communal harmony.

The other form of collective interreligious prayer is non-sectarian. When people of different religions come together they pray together. And in order to enable all to participate in the prayer without compromising their personal faiths they use a non-sectarian format: all prayer and hymns or "*bhajans*" are addressed to God and not to any particular deity or any particular manifestation of the one God.

The commonest form of this is at school assemblies, particularly in Christian schools. All students participate in prayer, but the prayer itself is non-sectarian. In one of the schools where I help out, almost every month the students have a prayer session together lasting almost an hour; with *bhajans*, readings from the scriptures and reflection, intercessory prayer, etc. Nothing in all this is sectarian (except, naturally, the readings from the different scriptures; needless to say that no passages which may have a sectarian flavor will be read on such occasions).

I belong to a Movement called Inter Religious Harmony Movement: we have with us people from different religious and cultural backgrounds: Hindus, Christians, Muslims, Jains, Parsis, Buddhists and also atheists (or rationalists). We meet regularly twice a month and we spend some time in prayer. Our prayer is non-sectarian so that every one who attends can participate. Our aim in meeting is to promote understanding and harmony. We have at these meetings someone to share with us his/her views, experiences, or to enlighten us on the point of view of his/her religion on current issues. We also organize "live-in" sessions where we spend a week-end in a remote place with a spiritual agenda, seeking to enrich ourselves by the God-experience of others.

At these programmes we have one more form of non-sectarian prayer, and this is meditation. Educated Hindus, while not fully giving up ritual and

cult, are going in more and more for yoga and meditation as propagated by different Gurus.

There are different forms of eastern meditation, they are different ways of achieving a common goal: the stilling of the mind, reaching a state of thoughtlessness. So that the mind, from being turned outward, in a way turns inward and becomes conscious of itself. A form of self-consciousness unmixed with any object consciousness: consciousness as witness witnessing itself. When one arrives at such self-consciousness, one has moved from the level of doing to the level of being; such an experience is an experience transcending all limitations, the experience of the infinite.

Such eastern meditation (in its various forms) is neutral so far as religious faith is concerned and, as such, is open to participation by all. As I said, educated Hindus are taking to these forms. Christians and others too are taking to them, more out of curiosity at first. Muslims, however, in general are very cautious in participating in any prayer that is not of their tradition.

A few general observations. Initiative in organizing inter-religious prayer, particularly of the non-sectarian kind, is generally taken only by Christians. We do not find other religious groups taking leadership in this. Other groups do organize *Sarva Dharma Sammelanas* (get-together of people of all Religions), a juxtaposition of different religions and prayers. This is because just now it is generally Christians who ask themselves the question of the theological significance of religions other than their own, the significance and meaning of multi-religious prayer, etc.

The question is not of much importance to Hindus because they give greater importance to subjective religious attitudes rather than to objective religious truth; hence, by and large they have no real difficulty in going to a Christian shrine, taking part in Novena prayers and even receiving holy communion. Muslims in general do not feel comfortable in any prayer form outside their own, and are generally hesitant to participate in any interreligious meeting not organized by one of them. I was once co-secretary of an interreligious group along with a Hindu and a Muslim. The Hindu could never understand why the Muslim could not at least occasionally worship in the Hindu temple when he, a Hindu, so freely participated in Christian services.

I believe that inter-religious prayer, particularly non-sectarian prayer, is an important contribution of Christians to India today. It will not only bring together people of different religions in understanding and harmony, it will also help to purify the prayer of all religious traditions from excess of cult and rituals which make prayer distasteful to the younger generation. Both these, religious harmony and purification of religious worship, are essential for our time.

Interreligious Prayer in Silsilah

Aminda E. SANO

Editor's Note: *Aminda Sano is a member of "Silsilah" and animator of a small community of Catholic consecrated women who are committed to Christian-Muslim dialogue in Zamboanga, Southern Philippines.*

Introduction

Silsilah Prayer to Silsilah Dialogue Movement is an interreligious prayer. It is a spontaneous prayer organized by Muslim and Christian members of the Movement held every Saturday from 3:00 to 4:00 p.m. at the Silsilah Center. Silsilah members, friends and acquaintances are invited to attend and experience praying together regardless of their culture and religion.

Pre-Prayer

Those who come to the prayer early, gather around a group singing from some selected songs for peace and dialogue. There are those who get into exchanging good news or updates of happenings in the movement and other experiences. After this singing, someone who was assigned beforehand welcomes the participants with the following words:

Dear friends, we welcome you to a dialogue in prayer which we call the Silsilah Prayer. Your presence is indeed a great privilege. It is a realization of God's call amidst critical differences or conflict within us and outside of us. The situation basically points to man's lack of sensitivity to the Divine. Thus, many continue to live in a God-less way, isolating themselves from God and from one another. In time, we need a pause to listen, to get in touch with the LIFE deep within us. We need to reflect on things that led us to where we are, to dialogue and be united through prayer at a deeper level.

As we continue to reach out to one another, to form deep and lasting friendship in an atmosphere of trust and love, to rediscover His presence and be awakened anew to His love in our hearts, we experience what prayer can do to change our lives. Together then we can face the many difficulties that challenge us in our world today. We are invited now to think and link ourselves back to God in order to become better persons; the Muslims becoming better Muslims and more committed to the Islamic faith; the Christians becoming better Christians and more committed to the Christian faith. In this light, we are gathered here to dialogue in prayer. In prayer, there are no negative verbal encounters for we make our differences in beliefs the bases of our respect, understanding, love and mutual acceptance. In an atmosphere of prayer, we hope to create a climate of friendship where we can allow each other to begin dialogue with God, and fellow humans. We pray that we can truly become a community of friends, supporting one another and praying together.

Then a brief elucidation of the topic in Islamic and Christian perspectives follows to reinforce the need to be enriched by the values and virtues which are common to Islam and Christianity.

Silsilah Prayer

The prayer starts with an opening prayer by a Muslim – *Al Fatiha.* Everybody stands up and listens to the prayer. After that, the facilitator invites everybody to sit down for the reading of the texts from the Holy Bible by a Christian and the text from the Holy Qur'an by a Muslim. The idea of realizing the common link – Silsilah – a chain of unity with God, is made possible on the part of the Muslims through the Holy Qur'an and the Christians through the Holy Bible. [Silsilah is an Arabic term which means chain. It has been used by Sufis (Muslim Mystics) to describe their experience of unity with the Divine.]

The process continues with a moment of silence together, allowing each other to go into deep silence simply to give space for a dialogue with self, others and God. It is a continuous discovering of man's relationship with the Creator who alone can transform the minds and hearts of His creatures from prejudices, biases and fears, especially those that may have existed between Muslims and Christians, in order to create a strong bond of friendship in the spirit of dialogue guided by the teachings of Islam and Christianity respectively. The closing prayer, *Our Father*, is being recited by a Christian. After the Silsilah Prayer each participant is given the opportunity to share any dialogue experiences, or difficulties they have encountered in the process to promote better understanding and deeper relationships among people in society.

The Silsilah Prayer can not be identified with the official prayer of the Muslims (*salat*) or of the Christians (Liturgical prayer). It is expressed in different ways, like:

1. Muslims and Christians together using an informal and spontaneous prayer accepted by Muslim and Christians who believe in Dialogue.
2. Muslims and Christians in different places but at the same time praying for dialogue.
3. Groups at prayer in separate places and different times (Muslims alone or Christians alone) using any form of prayer suggested by their own religion or community, but united by the same spirit of Dialogue.

4. Personal prayer of the Muslims and the Christians performed at any time and chosen place with the desire to dialogue according to the vision mission of the MOVEMENT. For this the Muslims are invited to choose Sunday as the day of their Silsilah prayer in union with the Christians' obligation day and the Christians are invited to choose Friday with the same spirit united to the Muslims in prayer.

Concluding Statements

Bangalore-1996 and Bose-1997

Findings of an Exploratory Consultation on Interreligious Prayer: Final Statement (Bangalore, India)

In a world of many bitter divisions to which sadly religious differences often contribute, there is an urgent call to all people of faith to seek understanding and cooperation. In response to this vocation, Christians should be anxious to seek fellowship with people of other religions, work together with them, and in such a process welcome opportunities to pray with them, whilst being alert to the great sensitivity that this practice requires.

At a consultation arranged jointly by the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue and the Office on Inter-Religious Relations of the World Council of Churches, held at the Ecumenical Christian Centre, Bangalore, India from 5-9 July 1996, twenty-five participants from a variety of Christian traditions and from different parts of the world, shared their experiences of interreligious prayer and meditation. They were also addressed by a Hindu and Muslim speaker and prayed together with a local interreligious group, Ashirvad.

1 – The Phenomenon of Interreligious Prayer

Participation in interreligious prayer is not an optional activity restricted to an elite group, but an urgent call for a growing number of Christians today, and should be a matter of concern for all Christians. In the pluralistic world in which we live, concrete situations of everyday life provide opportunities for encounter with people of living faiths. These include interfaith marriages, personal friendship, praying together for a common cause (in the context of war, racism, human rights violations, AIDS, etc.), national holidays, religious festivals, school assemblies, meetings between monastic communities of different faiths and gatherings at interreligious dialogue centers. Sometimes, it is prayer for a common purpose, perhaps in a crisis situation, which draws people of different faiths to pray together. Often, the experience of working together on a social project leads to a desire to pray together. In all of these contexts, respect, honesty, transparency and openness nurture interreligious prayer and make it possible.

Experience shows that there are various forms of prayer among people of different faiths. Christians may be invited as guests to other places of worship, where they should be respectful of the practices of that tradition. Christians

may invite guests of another religion to a church service and should ensure both a welcome and careful explanation. Some make the distinction between multi-religious prayer and united interreligious prayer. Multi-religious prayer juxtaposes the prayer of different faith traditions. The advantage is that the integrity and rich variety of each tradition is honored. The disadvantage is that one may remain a mere bystander without entering into the spirituality of the other. The challenge here is not simply to listen respectfully to the prayer of the other, but to become deeply engaged in it, recognizing that every genuine prayer is inspired by the Spirit.

United interreligious prayer is an occasion when people of different faith traditions plan, prepare, and participate in a prayer which all those who come can or may claim as their prayer. The advantage is that it allows all present to pray together. The disadvantage is that it can at times reduce prayer to the lowest common denominator and it can take away the uniqueness of each religion.

Multi-religious and united interreligious prayer are neither intended to create a new religion nor to be a substitute for the regular pattern of a particular faith community. Rather, they acknowledge the rich diversity of the world religions and affirm the unity of the human family. For some, however, interreligious prayer is recognized as a way of life, especially in some basic communities.

Some Christians have also found that meditation serves as a point of interreligious encounter. This "being" together even when meditation is silent may lead to a profound sense of unity. Christians have also found their own prayer enriched both by the meditation methods and scriptures of other traditions. Whatever the situation, the key to authentic interreligious prayer is a sense of being rooted in one's own tradition and an openness to the working of the Spirit in other traditions.

Interreligious prayer, meditation and worship are intimately intertwined and cannot be separated, although they can be distinguished from one another. Likewise, interreligious prayer has many forms, depending upon circumstances and can be nurtured both by vocal prayer and by deep silence. It is also shaped by the participants with whom one is praying. For example, those who share a faith in God may find it easier to pray together, whereas some would have difficulty with the very idea of "prayer to God".

2 – Key Issues surrounding Interreligious Prayer

The practice of, and participation in interreligious prayer of various kinds raises several issues, both pastoral and theological. These issues, including the

very naming of the phenomenon, need to be addressed by the laity in our churches, the leadership of the church, and seminarians. We have used here 'interreligious prayer' as a general term for this varied phenomenon.

What is the underlying inspiration of interreligious prayer? Though most fruitful interreligious prayers have occurred in situations of crisis, such as, the citizenship action against hunger and misery in Rio, Brazil, the prayers during the aftermath of the Oklahoma bombing in the U.S.A., the ethnic conflicts in Sri Lanka, the Ayodhya incident in India, etc. they bring people together during times of celebration, civic occasions and regular programs of interreligious prayer, such as Silsilah, a dialogue movement that promotes better understanding between Muslims and Christians in the Philippines. In this context we want to remember especially the *Ribat es Salam* (the Bond of Peace), a Muslim-Christian prayer group around the Trappist monks of Tibhirine (Algeria). This dialogue through prayer was destroyed ruthlessly by the murder of seven monks, but this initiative has not been buried with them.

We are convinced that one is engaging in interreligious prayer not only to meet the demands of particular occasions, but also as an expression of our faithfulness to the Gospel itself. Jesus himself urges us to receive hospitality from others as well as to give (Luke 10:7). This receiving of hospitality is not limited to food and drink but extends to what is precious to our neighbors – prayer and worship.

Participation in interreligious prayer does not signal an inadequacy of, or insufficiency in, the Christian prayer tradition. Some may ask whether we had exhausted the riches of the Gospel that we now turn to other religious traditions for the sustenance of our spirituality. Our stories of interreligious prayer reveal that those who engage in interreligious prayer are strengthened and widened in their own Christian faith. They experience an overflowing of grace.

While one of the aims of interreligious prayer is to enter fully into the prayer-experience of the other, one needs to observe some caution. The uniqueness of the prayers of people of other religions needs to be maintained and cherished during interreligious prayers. Some Buddhists would want to keep a distinction between their non-theistic meditation and a Christian's appropriation of it into a theistic framework. Our appropriation of the religious symbols of others and the meditative and other methods of prayer should respect the integrity of the other and should by no means be exercised as a "taking over" or "coopting" of the other's tradition as happens in the typological use of the Hebrew Bible. A relation of power may be involved in such mutual appropriation of symbols and one needs to be acutely aware of this.

Silence as a form of interreligious prayer should be taken seriously into account. Prolonged and creative silence can lead to a meeting of persons in their innermost being. It can unite hearts in prayer. It may also be noted that there are those who, while appreciating the value of silence, see it as not being sufficient to forge a fuller sense of unity among the people of various religions. Some others find prolonged silence as unhelpful because their cultures have often expressed and experienced spiritual depth through song, dance, and movement.

There are those in our churches who are in need of encouragement to join in interreligious prayer either with their neighbors or more publicly. This may occur in their households, in their communities, and in their parishes. However, we need to be sensitive to those who have converted to Christianity from other religions. They may face particular difficulties because of their newly found Christian identity.

While some people may use biblical texts to discourage Christian participation in interreligious prayer, others may find encouragement for the same in the biblical teaching on loving one another, showing hospitality, and praying without ceasing.

The churches have in the past found themselves in situations of religious plurality and have not always followed a policy of separation and isolation. For example, some Christians in India have through the centuries integrated themselves well into its multi-religious life. We also find encouragement from the Roman Catholic Church's call for a positive attitude towards people of other religions, and to "take into greater consideration what men have in common and which impels them to live their destiny together" (Vatican II, *Nostra Aetate*). We find further encouragement from the World Council of Churches' work to promote interreligious dialogue and understanding, which "is a joyful affirmation of life against chaos, and a participation with all who are allies of life in seeking the provisional goals of a better human community" (WCC, *Guidelines on Dialogue*).

Interreligious prayer invites some of the important theological motifs into the discussion. For example, what does it mean to say that God is one? Are we all praying to one and the same God, though our images and understandings of God are diverse and different? How do we expound our doctrine of God in non-theistic settings? These are closely connected to how we view theologically the fact of religious plurality in today's world. We need to find fresh ways of articulating our belief with regard to the place of religions in the economy of salvation. Going beyond the categories of exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism, we are called upon to find creative ways of theologically celebrating the Spirit at work in other religions. One way may be through a fuller

exposition of the Doctrine of the Holy Spirit and recognizing the work of the Spirit far beyond the confines of our ecclesial communities and the limits of our theological imagination. Holding fast to the centrality of Christ, we urge careful theological reflection on our understanding of the uniqueness and universality of Christ.

Some may ask whether participation in interreligious prayer blunts the cutting edge of the Gospel and rushes into harmony with people of other religions, unmindful of the prophetic vocation of the Church. Interreligious prayer does not, however, remove the Christian responsibility to give an account of the hope that is in us, always with gentleness and reverence (I Peter 3:15). It is a significant part of the healing and reconciling mission of Christ in the world.

3 – Paths to the Future

Occasions for interreligious prayer are likely to increase. Great variety is to be expected as interreligious prayer relates to particular situations and should be shaped by those involved. It would be unhelpful, at this stage, to seek to regulate this development, although some churches may find it useful to produce guidelines relevant to their particular situation.

All Christians should be sensitive to each other and seek to ensure that a practice intended to promote human unity does not become a cause of division. We recognize that Christians may sincerely disagree about what is appropriate. Christians who are called to explore new relationships with people of other religions should be encouraged and supported, but they should seek opportunity to explain their practice and thinking to others who have not shared their experience. Christians should exercise discernment in light of their faith in Christ when they participate in united interreligious and multi-religious prayer.

As interreligious prayer is intended to foster human unity, its practice also makes even more urgent the search for Christian unity, prayer, and eucharistic fellowship. Disunity in the Church hinders the Church's work for the unity of all people.

The search for human unity requires interreligious dialogue and co-operative action as well as prayer. Indeed, interreligious prayer is most meaningful where a close relationship exists between participants. We urge the churches to devote more resources for interfaith work.

It is also important that clergy and teachers understand the dynamics of this work and that there are adequate opportunities at theological colleges and

seminaries for students to learn about other religions and to meet with some of their members. Particular thought needs to be given to ways of helping members of parishes to appreciate the importance of interreligious work and to share in it.

While recognizing that the development of interreligious prayer will be related to particular situations, we see a great value in the World Council of Churches-Office on Inter-Religious Relations and the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue continuing to provide opportunities to share and reflect on this experience, so that the Churches together joyfully respond to the new opportunities of not only meeting and working with members of other religions, but also, where appropriate, praying with them. Such prayer, we believe, is a symbol of hope, which both reminds us of God's purpose and promise for justice and peace for all people and calls us to offer ourselves to be used in this work.

Theological Reflections on Interreligious Prayer: Final Statement (Bose, Italy)

Introduction

There is today an increasing awareness that our world is marked by religious plurality. People of different religions meet and reflect upon the significance of religious diversity. There is sometimes a desire for an encounter on a deeper level, a level which has come to be called interreligious prayer. Out of the reality of living together as people of different faiths, whether within the family setting or in a common neighbourhood, a call is felt to share life and spirituality with one another. Celebrations of common events, such as marriage or other life ceremonies, but also calamities and natural disasters, can bring people of different faiths to enter into an experience of interreligious prayer.

Given this reality, the Office on Interreligious Relations (OIRR) of the World Council of Churches and the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue (PCID) decided in 1994 to examine the question of interreligious worship and prayer. A questionnaire was sent out to churches, study centres and theological institutions.

At a consultation arranged jointly by PCID and OIRR, and held at the Ecumenical Christian Centre, Bangalore, India, in July 1996, participants shared their experiences of interreligious prayer and meditation.

The document, which we here present, is the result of a new consultation held at the Community of Bose outside of Magnono in Italy, 25-29 September 1997. It offers some theological reflections and practical suggestions on interreligious prayer from a Christian point of view. Our reflections do not make any pretence to be definitive and do indeed call for further reflection. Following upon the recommendations of the consultation in Bangalore, we have at this consultation examined biblical perspectives and considered theologically and pastorally the issue of interreligious prayer.

Biblical perspectives

In the Bible we meet God as creator of the whole world, a God of justice, mercy, love and peace in the midst of the vicissitudes of life. We meet Jesus Christ as the Son of God reconciling humankind with the Father and human

beings among themselves. We meet the Holy Spirit as the Giver and Sustainer of Life, the very source of prayer and intercession.

In the Holy Spirit we are called to become disciples of Christ, followers of the way of the cross, in which the double commandment of love is not only symbolised but also realised: the horizontal beam representing love among human beings and the vertical beam standing for the love between God and us. The one cannot be without the other.

God is love. The love for God and the love for our neighbour cannot be separated.

God is light and involves us in a struggle against darkness, evil and unrighteousness, inviting us to pass from darkness into light. God wants us to free ourselves from our idols and to meet the other with humility and openness. God calls us to love every one, even our enemies.

Interreligious prayer can be seen as one way of practising love towards our neighbours and of striving with them in a common effort to build a more peaceful and more just world.

Listening attentively to the word of God, we discover in it at least two ways of speaking about prayer in other religious traditions.

The Bible teaches us that God, out of His goodness, has spoken with human beings and made with them convenants from the very beginning and down the ages of human history. Through tradition from the early beginnings of the Church, we learn about several convenants, with Adam and Eve before the flood, in the time of Noah after the flood, in the time of Moses with the gift of the Law, and finally the convenant in Christ which brings humankind into a new closeness with God.

The Bible also speaks about human beings responding to God with prayers and sacrifices which are pleasing to God, as in the stories of Abel, Noah and Melchizedek. In such authentic prayer, Christians can recognise and appreciate the working of the Holy Spirit. Also the biblical tradition of sacred hospitality should encourage us to a generous openness towards people of other religions.

These biblical perspectives, only briefly mentioned here, may provide a basis for a fundamentally open approach to the various expressions of prayer to be found in the different religious traditions of the world.

The biblical message has, however, also another dimension, one which is found in both Testaments, warning against worship which encourages idolatry and harms human dignity. This warning, which is addressed first of all to the People of God concerning its own worship, requires of all of us a keen sense of

prudence, discernment and courage not to give in to forms of worship and prayer which corrupt God's image and are harmful to the moral and social fabric of the human community and society.

For Christians, the Bible points to Jesus Christ as the full revelation of God. He has taught us to pray in his name and to share in his relationship to the Father. His 'Gospel' inspires our prayer as well as our life, so that as we live with him, we always pray with him and through him in the Spirit.

Theological horizons

Prayer is a universal phenomenon encompassing a diversity of religious expressions. Although prayer or meditation in one form or another is to be found in every religious tradition, all prayers are particular and unique; the prayers of any one religious tradition are not simply variants of a common species, although they may in themselves communicate meaning and insight which goes beyond their own religious context.

Prayer reveals several dimensions of spirituality and religious life which may provide points of contact for interreligious prayer. Prayer serves as a moment of spiritual communication. It may also offer the opportunity of critical self-reflective encounter and a realisation of human contingency. Humility and the sense of dependence on the Other are paramount.

Prayer is both personal experience and communal event. Prayer takes place in the context of a religious community for whom it is the act of spiritual breathing. As communal event, prayer may serve to manifest and affirm particular identity: prayer is always the prayer of a particular religion, and indeed often of an identifiable tradition associated with a particular community of that religion. As personal event, prayer is private and intimate. The act of prayer gives evidence of religious identity and indicates commitment and choice. The person at prayer is vulnerable and so the context of prayer as sacral intimacy needs always and everywhere to be respected.

Prayer is multifaceted: there are many ways in which we pray. Prayer takes many forms: it embraces personal engagement, meditative waiting, resting in the darkness of abandonment. Prayer may embrace joyful expression and also agonised lamentation.

For Christians, prayer is a response to the word of God, which always precedes it. A Christian perspective on prayer may perceive Christ, as the icon of the Divine, constituting the ground and focus of prayer. A Christian understanding of prayer begins with learning from Christ himself, especially from the Lord's prayer. Thus a Christian perspective on prayer is based on Christ's own example and teaching.

We see interreligious prayer as a sharing in the "groaning of the whole creation", longing for the fullness of salvation and liberation, partaking in the "groaning of the Spirit", the Spirit who sustains us in our weakness since we do not know how to pray.

Interreligious prayer is an expression of the coming together of all the "scattered children of God". It is a sharing in the common journey towards the fulfilment of the Kingdom of God.

These reflections on the universal phenomenon of prayer and the particular understanding of the prayer of Christ, provide the possibility for Christians to join with others in prayer with confidence and hope.

Prayer together is an invitation to friendship, to share the reality of a loving God who is our Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer. It is an invitation to enter into the mystery of God which is beyond human intellectual grasp and understanding. It is a sign of the unity of humanity. We recognise the reality of religious diversity, which for us constitutes a theological mystery.

Interreligious prayer may be viewed as a relational bridge: between peoples, between faith communities, between religions. Such prayer is not just a 'goal' of dialogue, but can be considered the core of dialogical engagement. Interreligious prayer may lead us to acknowledge the sacred that is present in the religious experience of the other.

Theological reflection identifies two main forms of interreligious prayer, the responsive form and the hospitality form. Responsive interreligious prayer is the 'outward facing' prayer wherein may be discerned both the human need and the impulse of the Spirit in calling forth the response of prayer. Occasions of communal crisis and other significant events calling for a religious response form one dimension; appropriate occasions of civic celebration offering opportunity for a religious contribution or element are another. Here the rationale for inter-faith and multi-faith events in which Christians may legitimately participate is grounded in the Gospel imperative to love our neighbour: to serve, be-with in solidarity, affirm, and pastorally attend to the *oikoumene* of God.

Prayer that arises out of a situation of hospitality refers to occasions wherein one takes on the role either of host or guest. The theological rationale draws on our understanding that everywhere and at all times we are all "guests of the Divine", that "whatever we do to/with our neighbour, we do to/with the Divine"; that indeed God in Christ both goes before us and comes to us in the guise of our neighbour and the stranger in our midst. An interreligious engagement, which flows out of hospitality, entails an inbuilt asymmetrical relation. Neither hosts nor guests are required to deny themselves; both are taking a risk and allowing vulnerability. There are expected and accepted limits

and parameters within which authentic engagement can occur; if the rules are respected mutual integrity is maintained.

Pastoral reflections

The Christian response to the reality of interreligious encounter varies from place to place. It is noted that Christian missions have sometimes been characterised by ignorance of other faiths. Our attitudes to other religious faiths are sometimes ill-informed and based on exclusivist assumptions. Interreligious prayer presupposes an attitude of respect towards other faiths and a willingness to learn from and be corrected by the knowledge of other faiths. Respect for different religious faiths is crucial for the quality of our corporate existence. At the same time, in our common journey of searching for the truth we should be open to challenge each other in a spirit of mutual trust and enrichment.

We believe in the interconnectedness of our life of prayer and the life encounter in which we meet our brothers and sisters of different faiths, sharing life and care with each other. Our participation in interreligious prayer does not negate our commitment to proclaim the Christ event. Rather, our experience in a common prayer is part of our proclamation and living out of Christ. Our prayer with people of other faiths expresses our desire to overcome barriers and prejudices towards one another and to promote the life that Jesus brings to the world.

There are various ways in which people of different faiths come together to pray. There are sometimes invitations to be present at the worship of another community and then there are occasions of interreligious prayer. These prayers can be "multi-religious" or "united". Each of these forms will be treated separately.

Attendance at each other's worship

It is first assumed that such attendance is by invitation, an invitation which is not to be presumed. Going to another's place of worship is like going to another's home; one does not barge in uninvited. An invitation received, or sought, and accepted in advance, will allow the host community to prepare to receive its guests. When attending the worship of another community, "respectful presence" is recommended. This can be defined as an attentiveness to the symbolic expression of other religious communities. Christians when

receiving their guests, who are members of other faith communities, should be aware of their sensitivities, but they should be ready also to give witness to their own faith through liturgical expression. There should be an awareness that faith communities have their own rules and traditions. The observance of these, even when this imposes certain restrictions on the guests, should not be taken as something offensive.

Multi-religious prayer

By this is meant a service or occasion in which prayers of different faith communities are juxtaposed or presented in serial fashion. While representatives of one faith community are expressing their prayer, the other participants listen in reverent silence. Such occasions may arise spontaneously or they can be prepared in advance. In the latter case such services need to be prepared on a multi-religious basis. Each participant needs to know in advance the planned order of service, so that possibly offensive items may be avoided. The basic attitude is to be one of respect for the integrity of each faith community. This does not imply acceptance of everything that is expressed or done, nor does it mean indifference to truth. Particular attention is required to ensure that the service does not become a mere spectacle or an opportunity for unhealthy rivalry, but maintains a true atmosphere of prayer.

It will help when the prayers composing the service are chosen not in a haphazard way but according to a theme suggested perhaps by a particular event or a shared need. From a Christian perspective the sense of unity that may emerge could be seen as a witness to the work of the Spirit.

United or integrative interreligious prayer

Here the intention is to mould an order of prayer in which all are invited to join in. These services will require careful preparation in the same way as for the multi-religious prayer. Even more care may be needed, since it may be difficult to find expressions of prayer which will be acceptable to all. Members of different faith communities may be asked to forego some of the typical expressions of their faith so that other believers can join in reciting the prayer. Psalms, songs, poems of a more universal nature may sometime be found appropriate. Use can be made too of music and silence, and of symbols (light, fire, water, etc.) of universal significance.

There is a danger here of reducing the prayer to the lowest common

denominator and of losing the distinctive richness of each tradition. In this reductionist approach the particular is sacrificed for the sake of general harmony. As communities grow together in confidence they may become readier to accept that more use be made of prayers and symbolic actions typical of the respective faith traditions.

It is perhaps difficult to draw a hard and fast line between these types of interreligious services. There may be, as it were, a going back and forth between the two. The multi-religious prayer may well contain moments when all participants are united together in some response or symbolic action, while the united interreligious or integrative interreligious prayer may allow for the possibility of specific contributions from particular faith communities.

The ambiguity of language and symbols used in the prayers of people of different faiths needs to be recognised. The whole of one's being is involved in prayer, thus giving rise to bodily movements and special postures, some of these may be common among many religions, others may be particular to a certain tradition. There is a challenge here to be open to such different forms and postures seeing them as a possible source of enrichment for one's own spirituality.

As prayer transforms our life, so interreligious prayer should have a positive impact upon the life and relationship in our communities. As we move into deeper encounters in interreligious prayer, we might experience it as a journey, realising that prayer in itself is open-ended, a sign into the mystery of God.

* * *

Kindle within us all the fire of your love,
Carry upon your wings the prayers of all men and women,
who long for the truth to set us free.

O come, Spirit of God,
Walk with us along the paths of life,
Embrace us all with the friendship of your love,
Take away barriers that divide us and
Make us pray together in spirit and in truth.

O come, Spirit of God,
Draw all peoples together and
Bring us into the mystery of your life.
Teach us through the prayers of others,
That you are God and no-one else.
Enable us together to praise your name for evermore.

Amen.

Theological Evaluation

An Orthodox Perspective of Interreligious Prayer and Relations

George P. PULIKKOTTIL

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1 – Introduction

The term 'Orthodox' has in the modern language a somewhat negative connotation of rigidity or ultra traditionality. It is seen sometimes as a fundamental system which is not open to many other ways of thinking. So one may ask what an Orthodox Church can do for 'Interreligious Prayer and Relations'.

The term 'Orthodox' comes from two Greek words, namely ο"ρθος and δόξα, which mean straight and praise respectively. To make it more clear, an Orthodox Church claims that she praises God in the straight manner. That is why they gave prime importance to the apostolic traditions of the Church. An Orthodox Church tries always to reflect a faith which cannot differ from the teachings of Christ and his disciples. Moreover, the Church, the Body of Christ, guided by the Holy Spirit is the authority. When new problems or questions evolve, the Church is only able to decide in communion with the Holy Spirit and with the help of the Word of God. The Church is free to think and take an appropriate decision. She can even review the decisions which she has taken in the past to suit the new situations or revise them according to the need, but again in full accordance with the above said criteria. The only fact which has to be kept in mind is that the decisions and approaches of the Church must not differ from her basic faith.

A study of the history of Orthodox Churches reveals that the Church has had a number of dialogues with other Religions from her very beginning. Most of the apologetical writings of the early centuries deal with the question 'how far the Church can co-operate with other beliefs and practices, and how far not!'[1] In these dialogues and in the accounts of the lives of the Fathers (which were also actually a dialogue with other religious faiths), there are some interesting points which are relevant for our present discussion.

[1] See the Apologetical Writings of the Early Christian Church Fathers, especially those of Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, etc.

2.1 – God is the God of all

One of the most important features of the Church is her belief in 'One God', the creator of heaven, earth and all things visible and invisible.[2] So there cannot be many gods. As God is the God of the universe, everything in this universe belongs to Him.[3] For this reason, the Church is not in a position to exclude anything in the universe. Rather she has the responsibility to understand and to incorporate them into the will of God. A Christian cannot question the cosmic aspect of Christian theology, and especially its soteriological concerns. This is the reason why the Church should engage in dialogue and relationship with other beliefs. So Orthodox Churches consider better relations and communications with other religions as a necessary part of their life.

2.2 – Christ is the Redeemer of all

The Church Fathers are in full accordance with the writers of the New Testament whenever they say that Christ is the Redeemer of the whole Universe.[4] The second Paragraph of the Nicene Creed shows this with all clearness.[5] It is especially notable that 'He descended from above for the deliverance of the whole humanity' and not just to save a distinguished group of people.

2.3 – Holy Spirit is the Spirit given to all

Holy Spirit gives life to every one and to every living creature.[6] The Fathers have always empasised the 'all-renewing power' of the Holy Spirit. The

[2] Cosmological accounts of Genesis Ch. 1 & 2. Also the Nicene Creed reads "We believe in one true God, maker of heaven and earth, and all things visible and invisible".

[3] Jn 1:3 & 4: All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. Colossians 1:15 ff.: 'He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, ... all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together.'

[4] Romans 8:19-22, 10:11ff.; Colossians 1:19-22.

[5] And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God; ...through whom all things were made, ... who for us men and for our salvation came down, ... William A. Jurgens; *The Faith of the Early Church* Vol. I, Theological Publications of India, St. Peters Seminary, Bangalore, 1984 (Reprint 1992) p. 280, p. 399.

[6] In the Constantinopolitan version of the Nicene Creed we read: ... And in the one Holy Spirit, the Lord, the Giver of life, ... William A. Jurgens, *Ibid* p. 399.

Holy Spirit brings everything into truth too. The call of the Church is to turn herself time to time to come in full accordance with the Holy Spirit, so that she can take part in the making of the Kingdom of God. The W.C.C. Assembly in Canberra, 1991 has discussed this aspect in all its details and we have these documents before us. So I do not want to go into a theology of the Holy Spirit in depth. It is the Holy Spirit who remains in each person and intercedes to the Lord.[7]

2.4 – Church, the ground for dialogue

After emphasising the three basic points mentioned above, the Fathers say that the Church is the place where these things have to be witnessed. The Church, the Body of Christ, is the ground for dialogue with other religions. She has to witness to her Bridegroom (Eph 5:22-32), to Jesus Christ. That is why the Fathers always use the term 'witness (*marturia*)' instead of mission (*missio*).[8] The call of the Church is not to unite everything to her by force of any kind. But the Church is rather the ground where the whole humanity can see the love and redemption through Jesus Christ in the Spirit of God.

2.5 – Prayer for the redemption of the world (universe) and creation

The quality of true prayer is always that it inspires the creation as a whole to come together and it aims at the redemption of the whole universe. In Orthodox Tradition the ultimate aim of prayer is the redemption of the whole universe. Human beings represent the whole creation in prayer. The Holy Eucharist and the other sacraments, the daily offices and other prayers, use cosmic terms and symbols to imply the redemption of the universe from evil. In the *Sedro*[9] of the St. James Liturgy the Church makes an explicit appeal, 'we pray for the redemption of the whole universe.' The common prayer in Orthodox Tradition usually begins with the petition: 'Let peace and calmness be reigned throughout the universe.'[10] The basic aim of the seven times daily

[7] Romans 8:26 'Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words.' Also 8:27.

[8] J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, A & C Black, London, (V Edition Reprint 1989) p. 490.

[9] Sedro is a long prayer which comes after the reading of the Gospel in a Eucharistic liturgy in the Orthodox Syrian Tradition.

[10] The Wednesday vespers commence thus. ... "*d'nashare shaino washlome b'olmo kule*" ... (transliterated from Syriac).

offices is to sanctify time. Blessing the four directions of the earth on each feast of our Lord is a symbol of sanctifying the whole atmosphere. In the feast of Epiphany the Church prays to God that He will sanctify all water on the earth. On Palm Sunday the whole vegetative world is being blessed. On Good Friday one remembers that the extended hands of Jesus on the Cross were symbolically purifying the atmosphere. The simplest and ever repeated short prayer 'Kyrie-eleison' is actually a prayer of the whole creation, 'Lord have mercy upon us'. Of course the Christian Church understands the 'resurrection' as an overcoming of all kinds of fear and as a message of love and peace. This message is not only given to Christians but to the whole creation. This is actually the theological basis of Interreligious Prayer and Relations, when it is seen from an Orthodox theological point of view.

2.6 – Church, the Kingdom of God

The aim of the Incarnation was the establishment of the Kingdom of God. Christ took the Church as his 'bride' for this purpose. In the Orthodox Syrian Tradition the Church sings in the Holy Matrimony that the Messiah gave His Body and Blood on her fingers as the wedding ring. So the Church becomes responsible to bear 'witness' to the Incarnation. Thus the Church is the continuation of Incarnation. A person who joins the Church takes part in the incarnational aspect of the Church too. As the Incarnation is not intended for a kind of exclusivism, anybody can take part in it, provided he/she fulfils the basic requirement of repentance. The meaning of Baptism is also nothing but repentance, as the sinful body is being ritually washed to become clean and unblemished like the Spirit which dwells in it. But this action is the initiation into the Church too. As the concept *extra ecclesia nulla salus* is not widely appreciated today (because we humans are not able to pronounce a verdict on the salvation of non-Christians), we are not in a position to say that each non-Christian should get converted and become a Christian in order to be saved. Rather we pray like Jesus that the whole creation may be saved from the powers of evil. If this could be the basic understanding of the Church, we can pray with people of other religions too. It is not just 'to be together to pray' but 'praying together'.

3 – Orthodox Churches and Interreligious Prayers

Of course a question can be raised here. Why does the Orthodox Tradition not allow even members of other Christian denominations to take

part actively in its liturgies and sacraments? The answer is simple. The Orthodox Tradition understands the term 'Worship and Sacramental Liturgy' in a different way. Jesus' public ministry in the society was for all. But as He founded the Holy Eucharist, he was in a closed room with only the twelve. The Orthodox Syrian Tradition sings during the distribution of the Holy Eucharist on Maundy Thursday that 'our Lord said: "this is mystical communion for me and for my household." But because of the above-mentioned six aspects (2.1-2.6) Orthodox Churches can still promote the idea of Interreligious Prayer and Relations. The only requirement for an interreligious prayer is a theological openness, and the Orthodox theology with its cosmological perspectives can positively contribute to it.

In my opinion it is not at all necessary to mix the fine aspects of Sacramental Liturgy with Interreligious Prayer. Each religion has its own qualitative specialities. These qualitative specialities are their identity in the religiously pluralistic world. So an Interreligious Prayer which does not advocate 'a losing of individual identity' is ideal. Also in company with members of other religious faiths, one can find out one's own identity, one's own strength, one's own weakness and even present one's very identity before others. One can be proud of strength and correct weaknesses. At the same time one can see and learn other traditions and be enriched by them too. For all those who accept and respect the reality of other religions and their right to exist in the world with their own dignity, a stage for Interreligious Prayer is a place of mutual acceptance and respect. I want to make this fact more clear.

Though God is one, there are different understandings of Him. This happens because human efforts to understand reality are diverse. So there is nothing basically wrong in maintaining multiple concepts of the Holy. Down through the centuries through various cultures and civilisations these efforts to understand reality and to have a life style in response to this reality (in which the climatic conditions and peculiarities of the land also played a distinct role) lead to various institutions or schools of thought or simply religions. One of the earliest Indian religious texts, Rig Veda, says "there is only one truth and scholars interpret it differently."[11] It is logical that there will be different religions when there are so many cultures and languages present in the world. It won't be naive to prove this fact by observing the Christian Church itself. There is only one Bible and only one Christ. But the number of denominations is not just 'one'. 'Religions are the splendour of creation!'[12].

[11] Rig Veda, I 164:46.

[12] Sri Ramakrishna, an Indian mystic who experienced the beauty of different religions in his life.

The mutual interaction and dialogue between religions will provide a harmonious environment for the spiritual upliftment of the world and in that way a peaceful co-existence of humans can come into being. It is difficult to exclude religions from Christ and from the Christian Church in our post-modern world. But rather it is easier to make them co-operate with Christ and with the Christian Church, because He is the one who died and rose again for the whole creation. In this sense Christianity has the responsibility to call various religions to pray and glorify the Creator together. This will unite and integrate people and creation. That is the witness to which the Church is called for today.

4 – Possible themes and suggestions for Interreligious Prayer

As we have discussed earlier, Interreligious Prayer is a discovery of mutual co-operation and respect among religions. In every religion prayer promotes universal and eternal love and unity. This very aspect is seen in the high-priestly Prayer of Jesus too.[13] It can also be seen in the Indian Tradition. One popular Indian prayer is 'May the world be filled with happiness'.[14] An Interreligious Prayer is a mutual enrichment among human beings. A true worshipper of God will be a true lover of the universe and his/her fellow creatures. For this reason Interreligious Prayers could have humanitarian themes with a cosmic vision. I would like to point out certain themes in this regard, e.g., peace and justice on earth, integrity of creation, salvation of the universe, blessing of the vegetation and water, happiness and well-being of humanity, the sweeping away of hunger, poverty and all distress, just distribution of food, medicines, clothing and shelter for all human beings, washing away the sin of being rich in a poor world, other timely relevant issues, etc.

Interreligious Prayer is not at all a new idea for an Indian. We have experienced it for many years and do so even today in our land. When something important happens, when one of the leaders of our land passes away or when we remember a departed leader, we organise such ceremonies. A Christian Bishop or Priest will read a relevant text from the Bible, a Hindu Priest will recite a couple of *Shlokas*, a Muslim Maulavi will read one or two *Suras* from the Qur'an, etc. and ample interpretations of these passages to the public. Representatives of all Religions come together on such occasions to

[13] St. John 17.
[14] *Loka samastha sukhino bhavanthu!* (Transliteration from Sanskrit).

recite their prayers, and people of all different Religions say together 'Amen' or the equivalent. When we are able to bring such a glorious idea into being all over the world, the persons who would really rejoice about that would be the Father who created the universe, Jesus Christ who came down for us humans and for our salvation, and the Holy Spirit who inspires us to the integrity of creation.

5 – Conclusion

Interreligious Prayers and Relations are certainly an immediate need of the time. Religions are the divine institutions for the well-being of the universe. When we use them for the right purpose, they will bring forth good fruits. When it is the other way round, it would be a severe sin. The call that we hear today is to transform the religious 'chaos' into a religious 'cosmos'. The age of religious rivalry is over. Rather the religions now have the responsibility to come closer to each other to solve the issues of the world. This coming closer and working hand in hand is possible, only when they come together to pray. Only through such an action would they be able to resist all the evils that are present in the world. The Orthodox Tradition is fully in accordance with this call.

Theological Evaluation of Interreligious Prayer: The Catholic Tradition

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The Bangalore and Bose Statements indicate that the Church is required to respond to the "signs" of our time: the reality of interreligious prayer. Should Roman Catholics be involved in such events? Certainly, the main biblical currents would not seem to endorse such practices, especially if and when they appear to be idolatrous. And there is little in the tradition to support interreligious prayer. However, the Holy Father's initiation of and participation in the multi-religious prayer for peace in Assisi (1986), as well as his call to share more deeply with others, while respecting each other's difference and integrity, is an important spur to attend to this question as positively as possible. When speaking of interreligious dialogue, Pope John Paul II specifically enjoined: "Where circumstances permit, it means a sharing of spiritual experiences and insights. This sharing can take the form of coming together as brothers ans sisters to pray to God in ways which safeguard the uniqueness of each religious tradition"[1].

At this time it is clear that interreligious prayer is not possible in terms of cultic worship, if by this is meant the formal cultus that publicly defines religious adherence and practice – such as Baptism or Mass. We shall focus exclusively on non-cultic contexts (see the examples cited in the Bangalore document), where there may either be spontaneous shared prayers, the sharing of already existing prayers, or the composition of mutually acceptable prayers or silence, or a mixture of these. As all prayer is "with the church", any such meetings must be accountable to the wider Christian community who may not be explicitly participating.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* defines authentic prayer in terms of three characteristics: gift, covenant and commmunion. If we depart from these three 'marks' in interreligious prayer, then it cannot be acceptable. Only such strict criteria can safeguard against idolatry. What follows are generalized reflections which would have to be applied to each specific situation. There are no *a priori* answers.

[1] *Bulletin*, Secretariatus pro non Christianis, XXII, 1987, p. 224.

Prayer is a gift of the Holy Spirit, hence the *Catechism* says: "humility is the foundation of prayer. Only when we humbly acknowledge that "we do not know how to pray as we ought" are we ready to receive freely the gift of prayer"[2]. Two points are important here. First, the Church has acknowledged the presence of the Holy Spirit in religions and cultures: "The Spirit's presence and activity affect not only individuals but also society and history, peoples, cultures and religions"[3]. If that is so, it can mean that the prayers of other religions are, in part, gifts of the Holy Spirit. It can also mean that the Spirit is active in the hearts of those who pray with other religions. Second, such a recognition can mean that interreligious prayer may well express our being united in the Holy Spirit, so that such prayer is not fundamentally being nice to one's neighbour, but a coming into the presence of God – to worship and adore him "together", even if this "together" is in a limited and fragmented fashion. Of course, not all prayers are so inspired, nor all hearts equally receptive, and such judgements require careful and mature discernment.

The second mark of authentic prayer is that it springs from a convenant. Prayer, as the *Catechism* puts it, "is the place of encounter because as image of God we live in relation: it is the place of covenant ... Christian prayer is a convenant relationship between God and man in Christ"[4]. Here again, there are two points to consider. First, *The Catechism* affirms the validity of the convenant with Noah (Gen 9:8-16), and speaks of those who live within it, with an upright and pure heart, as "walking with God"[5]. Of these, it also says, "This kind of prayer is lived by many righteous people in all religions", and continues, "In his undefectable covenant with every living creature (Gen 9:8-16), God has always called people to prayer".[6] This does not mean that every prayer is genuine, but that non-Christian prayers can reflect this valid and universal covenant.

However, the covenant spoken of in *The Catechism* refers to the Christological form of covenant that is of course unique to Christianity. Here we must address the question: do we all pray to the same God? This is our second point. If we answer "yes" then we are guilty of indifferentism, a position specifically condemned by the Church. If the answer is 'no', then interreligious prayer is inadmissible. An authentic answer, reflected in *Nostra Aetate*, is that amidst important differences which should not be denied, there are also "common" elements. Hence a yes/no answer seems most honest to the complex realities before us. To take one example, while trinitarian belief is a

[2] *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, (1994 English translation), 2559.
[3] *Redemptoris Missio*, 28.
[4] *Catechism*, 2563-64.
[5] *Catechism*, 2569.
[6] *Ibid.*

stumbling block for Islam, nevertheless *Nostra Aetate* affirms that "The Church also regards with esteem the Muslims who worship the one, subsistent, merciful and almighty God, the Creator of heaven and earth, who has spoken to man."[7] Hence, it might be possible to pray together, celebrating what we might hold in common regarding God, as long as we do not deny or obscure fundamental differences that also divide us. The balance between this yes/no dialectic will differ from situation to situation, and wise and mature judgement is required in each context. The local bishop is one obvious reference point for such discernment.

We shall address the Christological element within this question by turning to the final mark of authentic prayer: communion. The question of Christ rightly has a trinitarian and ecclesial dimension: "the life of prayer is the habit of being in the presence of the thrice-holy God and in Communion with him. This communion of life is always possible because, through Baptism, we have already been united with Christ. Prayer is Christian in so far as it is communion with Christ and extends throughout the Church, which is his Body. Its dimensions are those of Christ's Love"[8]. There are four points worth considering when we turn to the Christological, trinitarian and ecclesial dimensions of prayer.

First, *Gaudium et Spes* (10, 15 and 22) has been reiterated by Pope John Paul II, to affirm that "the Holy Spirit offers everyone the possibility of sharing in the Paschal Mystery in a manner known to God."[9] This means that for those who have not explicitly rejected the gospel, a relationship to Christ is possible by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Second, the precise manner in which this can be achieved is left open. Various Catholic theologians have offered theological speculations as to the manner of this relationship, but for our present purpose it is not necessary to decide amongst the many options. It is sufficient to say that authentic non-Christian prayer that is inspired by the Holy Spirit is required theological exploration. It is in this sense that Christian participation in interreligious prayer might be possible. It is equally likely that the non-Christian might see in Christian prayer possibilities and orientations that we might question or not have seen.

Third, this should remind us that full communion with all women and men is an eschatological hope, not an attained reality. Hence, even when a Christian and Jew pray the same psalm together, which belongs to both their

[7] *Nostra Aetate* (Declaration on the Relation of the Church to non-Christian Religions), 3.
[8] *Catechism*, 2565.
[9] *Redemptoris Missio*, 28.

sacred scripture(s), it will contain different resonances and significations as well as similar meanings. The very idea of shared prayer implies a trusting gift being made, such that we relinquish control over the meaning of our words and trust that the Holy Spirit will act as an interpreter. Hence, to take another example, were the Christian to share the "Our Father" with a Muslim who shares "the Fatiha" (the opening verses of the Qur'an), the very juxtaposition of these two semantic forms will generate a new field of meanings within these prayers. What emerges cannot be predicted prior to their juxtaposition. Indeed, the juxtapositions of different prayers within the *Divine Office* have an analogous effect, constantly transforming our continuing relationship with God.

Finally, the boundaries of authentic prayer are seen in the "dimensions of Christ's love". To restrict these without good reason and careful discernment is to reject the life of God that continuously transforms creation. However, to hide the lamp of this love, given to us within the Church, is also to reject the life of God. In this respect, interreligious prayer also has a profound missionary dimension in our invitation to those who join us in prayer to find the fullness of communion with the triune God that we have begun to enjoy. Clearly, such a witnessing dimension may also be present for those whom we join in prayer. And our possible discovery of the riches of God's grace present in the other and their spiritual tradition should bring us joy and hope – and lead us to praise and worship.

The Bangalore and Bose statements, as well as the other essays in this collection, require us to consider seriously the "signs of our times". While interreligious prayer may not be a vocation for most Christians, and those who are called need careful formation and a deep prayer life of their own, we should consider carefully the positive reasons for such practices. For if such practices bear the seal of the Holy Spirit, then those Christians involved in interreligious prayer may be following Christ in ways that we have only come to dimly fathom. We shall know them by their fruits.

Can We Pray Together? Interreligious Prayer: A Protestant Perspective

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"This is my prayer to thee, my Lord –
strike; strike at the root of penury in my heart.
Give me the strength lightly to bear my joys and sorrows.
Give me the strength to make my love fruitful in service.
Give me the strength never to disown the poor
or bend my knees before insolent might.
Give me the strength to raise my mind high above daily trifles.
And give me the strength to surrender my strength
to thy will with love".[1]

Several years back, this prayer was given to a group of Christians with the request that they try to identify its source. Quite a few thought it was a prayer of St. Francis of Assisi. Other suggestions included "St. Teresa of Avila", "a Christian saint" whom they could not name, "Martin Luther" and "a verse from a devotional hymn by Charles Wesley". The group was somewhat surprised to learn that in fact the prayer was part of a collection called *Gitanjali* by the celebrated Hindu Bengali poet, Rabindranath Tagore.

It was interesting that none in the group even suspected that the prayer could have had a source outside the Christian tradition. It is also likely that none expected that a prayer that originated outside the tradition would have been used as a resource in a Christian workshop on Prayer!

Worship: A Private Sacred Space?

Every Christian is aware that people of other faiths pray and have a spiritual life. But, to whom do they pray? Who listens to their prayers? Is there

[1] Rabindranath Tagore, *Gitanjali (Song Offerings)*, Macmillan and Co., London, 1996, Song 36, p. 28.

a common ground between the prayer life of our neighbours and ours? – These questions do not normally appear as an essential part of Christian reflections on prayer. Through the centuries religious traditions have treated their prayer lives as mutually exclusive; they have seen their worship and prayer as belonging to the central core of their faith and in some sense defining the faith, marking it out from other ways of relating to the transcendent realm. In other words, religions tend to look upon their prayer and worship life as their "private space" not open to those who do not "belong".

A year before he died, David Brown, the late Bishop of Guilford, England, recorded one of the moments when this reality was brought home to him in a powerful way:

> My distance from Islam came home to me in a sad but profound way one evening in Khartoum, when I went to the home of a Muslim leader. There were some thirty men sitting at ease in his courtyard and for an hour or more we enjoyed a good and open discussion about religious matters. Then the time came for the night prayer, and they formed ranks to say it together. I asked if I might stand with them, but the *Shaikh* told me I could not do so, since I did not have the right 'intention' (*niyya*). I had to remain standing at the edge of the courtyard. Even though I have walked on the approaches of Islam for over 30 years I can only speak of it as a stranger.[2]

The Muslim in this story was protecting the "private space" of his tradition. There are, however, several other accounts today on how this private space is gradually opening up as closer relationships are established across the religious barriers. In his book, *Encounter in the Spirit: Muslim-Christian Meetings in Birmingham*, Andrew Wingate recounts the story of how a Muslim and Christian group of persons grew closer together through years of meeting and sharing each other's faith perspectives. These encounters eventually led to an openness to participate in prayer life:

> .... The other breakthrough came at the end of the evening when Zaheer (the Muslim friend) asked me to pray, not just with him privately, but with the whole group, twelve Christians and seven Muslims, in the small prayer room in Nazir's terraced house..... I included a prayer for the bereaved Muslim family next door, and for Beirut where, in the name of our two faiths, people fought and killed. In that context how much our meeting meant! I prayed "In thy

[2] David Brown, "Meeting Muslims" in: *The Churches and Islam in Europe (II)*, Geneva, 1982, p. 47-48. Quoted in: *Can We Pray Together? Guidelines on Worship in a Multi-Faith Society*, Published by the Committee for Relations with people of Other Faiths, British Council of Churches, London, 1983, p. 1.

name, O Lord". Iqbal, too, prayed on behalf of us all, and we ended with a common meal, supplied by the Muslim family next door.[3]

As we live and share life with friends of other religious beliefs, can we pray together? What guidelines can we give to Christians who find themselves in situations where a person of another faith calls upon them to pray? What does a Christian do when a Muslim friend visiting him or her at sick bed offers to pray for him or her? How should one respond when there is a sincere call to persons of different faiths to come together to pray, and to pray together for peace in times of war or social conflict?

The Protestant Hesitations

Protestant hesitation to pray with persons of other faith traditions functions at different levels. In the first instance, the prevalent mainline traditional Protestant thinking on other religions has been deeply influenced by Barth's theology, which made a sharp distinction between 'religion' and 'revelation'. In Barth's opinion, all religion, including Christianity as a religion, is part of the human rebellion against God. Humans, in their pride, have always attempted to have knowledge of God through their own efforts. But the 'wholly Other' can never be grasped by sinful humans. Knowledge of God, in Barth's perspective, can only be received through God's gracious self-revelation. This self-revelation of God took place in God's mighty acts in history and in a more decisive way in the Incarnation. The message of the Gospel, as the unique self-revelation of God, presents a "crisis" in the life of every human person, demanding the response of faith and discipleship.

In his quest to emphasize the radical challenge of the Gospel as demanding a decision, Barth had reduced all religious traditions to "unbelief", and with it, by implication, cast serious questions on the validity of the worship life of other faiths. Hendrik Kraemer, interpreting Barth's theology for Protestant understanding of mission, developed the theory of "Biblical Realism", according to which there was a "radical discontinuity" between the Gospel and other faiths.

Although Protestant Christian theology has since moved beyond Barth and Kraemer, suspicion of other faiths as having any relationship at all with God persists. An average Protestant believer, despite the confession that there

[3] Andrew Wingate, *Encounter in the Spirit: Muslim-Christian Meetings in Birmingham*, WCC Publications, Geneva, 1988, p. 19.

is only one God, the creator of all human beings, would find it difficult to believe that this one God might have any ongoing relationship with the rest of humanity. There is even greater hesitation on the possibility that the rest of humanity might have a relationship with the God whom Christians worshipped "through Jesus Christ".

In 1986 the Lutheran Council in the USA brought out a "Counsel for Lutherans" on the broader question of Interfaith Worship. Its concluding remarks show how the Protestant view of worship is believed to be in an inalienable link with its doctrines:

> The worship of Christians reflects their Christology. Focusing upon the Triune God, Christians in worship inevitably project what they confess in their doctrines concerning Jesus of Nazareth, the Christ. It is especially in the context of worship that the Christian church historically has celebrated the divinity and the humanity of Christ. Through forms and expressions of worship Christians reflect Christological doctrines and apply them to matters of both faith and life.[4]

This Lutheran view reflects the general Protestant emphasis on the relationship between worship and the doctrines of the church.

Secondly, many believe that a commonly shared faith is necessary in order to pray together. "While there may be only one God" people argue, "there are diverse concepts of God, some bordering even on the affirmation of the demonic. How, then, can people with different conceptions of God pray together?" It is important, however, to note that there are different approaches to this issue among the various religious traditions themselves. Hinduism, for example, affirms a plurality of conceptions and approaches to God. Since what is signified as "God" is an unfathomable mystery, Hindus claim that it is only natural that there are different ways to understand and approach God. They further hold that human beings and the circumstances into which they are born are also so diverse that there would naturally be a vast variety of ways in which people seek to know and relate to God. Thus a plurality of understandings of God and a diversity of ways of relating to the Ultimate are seen as quite legitimate and necessary.

Christians, however, have insisted on the need for "common faith". On this basis some streams within the church would deny the Eucharist to others even though it is believed by many to be central to the identity of the church itself. While Protestants are more open on the question of sharing the

[4] For full statement see: *Counsel for Lutherans With Respect to Interfaith Worship*, by the Division of Theological Studies, Lutheran Council in the USA, New York, 1986, p. 3.

Eucharist, they generally tend to apply the principle of "the need for a common theological basis" when dealing with the question of praying with adherents of other faiths.

At the third level, many Protestants hold that praying with persons of other faiths is not in keeping with biblical teachings. Some would argue that the commandment "You shall have no other gods..." prohibits worship with others. Others equate the use of images in Hindu worship with the rejection of idols in biblical narratives. Still others believe that the Great Commission "to preach, teach and to baptize" by implication rejects any knowledge of God in the prayer life of their neighbours.

What then can we say about praying with others? Was the Christian group in Birmingham wrong when they heeded to the request of the Muslim friend to lead the group in prayer? Was it violating God's law in participating in a prayer led by a Muslim?

Dimensions of the Issue

Some of the difficulty in dealing with the issue results from not making careful distinctions in the terms used. Words like "worship", "prayer", "liturgy", "spirituality", "spiritual disciplines", etc. are often used by many as if they refer to the same reality. In fact closer examination would show that they refer to different aspects and dimensions of the human quest for the Divine. For the purpose of this specific discussion, it is important to see the relationship and the difference between "prayer" and "worship".

Anthropologists say that all human beings at all periods of history have had some practice of prayer. The urge to pray, it is said, comes both from the sense of mystery associated with the creation that surrounds the humans as well as from their sense of self-transcendence. Prayer, in this context, is an act by human beings to be in communication with the Sacred, the Holy, the Other, or in common parlance, with God. Prayer is the universal aspect of religion. "Prayer to religion" the saying goes, "is what rational thought is to philosophy". Even though not every human being necessarily engages in conscious prayer, it is natural, normal and an inalienable part of being human to have a sense or an attitude of prayer, especially in moments when the human heart is elevated by the sense of the mystery of life or confronted with the finitude of human existence.

"Worship", on the contrary, normally does not refer to a general quest, but to an ordered response to a realized experience of the Sacred within a specific human community. It is significant that the word worship normally

does not refer to acts by individuals but of communities. Here the emphasis is not on "search", "quest" or "exploration" but on "communication", "adoration" and "the confession of the faith" that has drawn a group of persons together, knitting them into a religious community. Every worshipping community has a story to tell. In worship, therefore, a community celebrates a central event that has been their "window" into the Divine. For the Jewish community, it would be the revelation of the Torah on Mount Sinai, to the Muslims the revelation of the Quran and to the Christians, the revelation in Jesus Christ. Thus, worship is not an entirely open-ended activity; it has points of reference; it is clothed in manifold symbolism; it is built on a shared story and is performed with the aid of myths, symbols, rituals and forms that carry meaning to those who are part of that "story".

It is, therefore, understandable that there are considerable reservations in all religious communities to participate in the worship of other faith communities or to freely throw open their own worship to those outside. There is a general tendency to want to respect each other's "sacred space".

Entering the Space of the Other Community

Today this notion that the "sacred space" of the religious traditions is also a strictly "private" or a "privileged" space has come under some pressure. The growth of interfaith understanding and of interfaith organizations throw whole communities together into relationships, and often there are calls not only to individuals but also to the traditions to engage in "common worship". This has remained a difficult subject. Protestants in this context have been willing to worship in the presence of others and to be present when others engage in worship. Common worship remains a problem for many. There are some, however, who argue that communities must gradually try to move into each other's sacred space and learn to be at home in them. Others hold that in addition to the specific ways in which given communities celebrate their faith, we must create new myths, new symbols, new rituals and new forms within which all humans can experience the Other. There are many issues that need to be looked at more closely in these proposals, but it is beyond the scope of this present discussion.

We then return to the issue of "prayer" and ask, "Can we pray together?" One of the difficulties within the Protestant tradition is that often people do not in fact distinguish between "worship" and "prayer", especially because much prayer takes place also in the context of worship. As mentioned above, there is a general assumption that one needs to have common faith also to engage in common prayer.

One of the problems facing Protestant Christianity is that it has paid little or no theological attention to its own confession with the Psalmist that the "The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof; the world and those who dwell in it". It has placed much more emphasis on the "fall" and on sinful humankind's need to be saved. Some of the Protestant thinking has interpreted the "fall" as total depravation or the complete corruption of the image of God in humans, thereby implying that there is a gulf between God and humans that can never be bridged through human prayer. Although much has been done in contemporary theology to correct this over-emphasis, the view prevails in some streams of Protestant theology and in popular thinking.

If we do not subscribe to Deism, but believe in a creator God who continues to care for creation, it is inconceivable that God is not in a relationship with all human beings. It is also equally inconceivable that all human beings are not in a relationship with God. In the Bible creation is a relational activity ("Let us make man in our own image"); to be human is to stand in a relationship to God. The view that the Bible teaches that the people of other faith traditions have no relationship with God is also questionable. It is of course an account of the faith of the people of Israel and of the church. It has no intention to explore the religious life of others and its relationship to God. But there are significant indications of a prayer relationship between God and non-Israelites. Melchizedek, Jethro, Balaam, Naaman and the Ninevites in the time of Jonah are all represented as people who raise their hearts in prayer to God who responds to them. The prophet Malachi appears to say that all worship reaches the one God: "People from one end of the world to the other honour me. Everywhere they burn incense to me and offer acceptable sacrifices" (Mal. 1.11)[5]. There are also instances in the New Testament which might be used to show that the biblical evidence is more mixed than it is often thought to be.

The biblical evidence, however, is not overwhelming, and it would be inappropriate to build arguments based on selected texts. But what is indeed overwhelming in biblical theology is the affirmation that God is one, and that God cares for all people. The Psalms are unequivocal in claiming the whole earth to the Lord and proclaiming God's providence over all of creation. Prayer, from wherever it comes, is human reciprocity to the God who provides. It is, therefore, important to distinguish "prayer" as a human longing for God

[5] Cf.: David Bookless, *Interfaith Worship and Christian Truth*, Grove Books, Nottingam, 1991, p. 11.

from "worship", a response of a community in relationship with God. We must reclaim and affirm our common humanity before God in the act of prayer.

Prayer then is an act of rooting oneself in that in which all "live, move and have their being"; it is an act of going out of oneself to be in communion with the Other; it is the cry of the heart in times of agony; it is the elevation of the soul in moments of joy; it is the art of being human in a life that has a depth of meaning. In other words, prayer is the language of the heart; unlike the language of the mind, it has no syntax.

Humans have learned to relate to one another and to work together despite speaking different languages, following diverse life-styles, being shaped by a variety of cultures and ideological persuasions. In all these, we have learned to deal with our differences, to see them in perspective and to "adjust" them so that we can still relate and affirm our common humanity.

Should we hold back when it comes to praying with others, which may well mean communicating with them and with the One in whom we all live, at the deepest level of human existence?

The concerns that we have looked at do remain. But to rise above them in order to relate to our neighbours "in depth" may well be the spiritual challenge of our day.

> "I boasted among men that I had known you.
> They see your pictures in all works of mine.
> They come and ask me "Who is he?"
> I know not how to answer them.
> I say, "Indeed I cannot tell."
> They blame me and they go away in scorn.
> And you sit there smiling.
>
> I put my tales of you into lasting songs.
> The secret gushes out from my heart.
> They come and ask me, "Tell me all your meanings."
> I know not how to answer them.
> I say, "Ah, who knows what they mean!"
> They smile and go away in utter scorn.
> And you sit there smiling" (*Gitanjali* – 102).

We say to you that we cannot join our neighbours in their deepest longing to relate to you because we know you, and they do not.

And You are sitting there, smiling!